BOOK 6

The Unicorn Chronicles

The WOUNDED TREE

Bruce Coville

THE UNICORN CHRONICLES: BOOK VI

THE WOUNDED TREE

Also by Bruce Coville

THE THIEF OF WORLDS

JEREMY THATCHER, DRAGON HATCHER

JENNIFER MURDLEY'S TOAD

GOBLINS IN THE CASTLE

ALIENS ATE MY HOMEWORK

MY TEACHER IS AN ALIEN

THE DRAGONSLAYERS

THE MONSTERS OF MORLEY MANOR

CURSED

SIXTH GRADE ALIEN

Other Books in the Unicorn Chronicles

Book 1: Into the Land of the Unicorns

Book 2: Song of the Wanderer

Book 3: Enter the Whisperer

Book 4: Secret of the Delvers

Book 5: The Invasion of Luster

THE UNICORN CHRONICLES: BOOK VI

THE WOUNDED TREE

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For

Dorothea, Samuel, and Mathilda

Who Fill Me With Joy

Forest.....
River.....
Swamp.....
Hills.....
Mountains....
Water.....

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Following is a list of characters introduced in previous volumes of the Unicorn Chronicles. Characters who appear for the first time in this book are not included.

HUMANS

Cara Diana Hunter: Cara leaped into the world of the unicorns by using an amulet given to her by her grandmother, Ivy Morris.

Beloved: The ancient and eternal enemy of the unicorns, Beloved seeks their destruction because of a horrible clash between her father and the unicorn Whiteling. Their struggle-to-the-death left the tip of Whiteling's horn lodged in Beloved's heart, where it both constantly wounds and constantly heals her. The horn has kept her alive for hundreds of years, but also keeps her in never-ending pain.

Ian Hunter: Cara's father, who had worked for Beloved in the hope of finding Cara after she was taken by her grandmother. He later turned against Beloved and in order to rescue Cara's mother from the Rainbow Prison. He occasionally loses his sight due to a desperate bargain he made to help him find that prison.

Martha Hunter: Cara's mother, only recently released from the Rainbow Prison, to which she had been exiled by Beloved. During her period of imprisonment no time had passed for her.

Fallon: A mysterious man — tall, muscular, with brown skin and long blonde hair — who accompanied Ian on his quest to enter the Rainbow Prison. Fallon is on a search for his heart-brother, Elihu, who he believes may be found in Luster.

Rajiv: A street boy from Delhi, who has also joined Ian's quest. .He is devoted to Ian and Fallon, and applies his street smarts to his new situation.

M'Gama (also known as "The Geomancer"): A tall, elegant woman of African descent, her magic is worked through earth and stone. She is a trusted advisor to the Queen.

Grimwold: An elderly dwarf who is the official Chronicle Keeper for Luster. He is responsible for recording new adventures and events after they happen.

Alma Leonetti: As a girl, she found her way to Luster to ask the old Queen, Arabella Skydancer, to bring the unicorns back to Earth. For her help over the years she was granted the chance to drink from the Queen's

pool. As a result, she has aged very slowly. Though now quite elderly, she continues to advise the new Queen, Amalia Flickerfoot.

Jacques: An elderly and usually gloomy-seeming man who has traveled for years with the Queen's Players. He was briefly married to Ivy Morris when she was in human form, and he may (or may not) be Cara's grandfather.

Thomas the Tinker: A kindly man, and one of the most widely traveled humans in Luster. He can mend almost anything.

Armando de la Quintano: A short, round, and remarkably cheerful man who is the leader of the Queen's Players. He is all showman, but utterly loyal to the Queen and to Luster.

Kenneth: One of Beloved's most trusted and faithful Hunters. He views Ian as a traitor to the cause of destroying the unicorns.

UNICORNS

Lightfoot: A rebellious unicorn prince who is next in line for the throne. He finds this idea ridiculous, and is considered a bit of a disgrace to the royal family. He was the first unicorn Cara met after entering Luster, and they have a strong friendship.

Amalia Flickerfoot: The Queen of the Unicorns; as a youth she was a restless wanderer much attracted to the human world. Hoping to keep Amalia safe should she be in danger of capture by Hunters, the Geomancer created a magic that would allow Amalia to become human. Using the magic caused her to lose her memory of her life as a unicorn, and for decades she wandered in human form as Ivy Morris. She was finally restored to her true form when the previous Queen, Arabella Skydancer, departed this life.

Moonheart: Amalia's brother and Lightfoot's uncle; he is a bit gruff and does not much approve of Lightfoot.

Belle: One of the more fierce unicorns of Luster.

DELVERS

Gnurflax: The king of the delvers; perpetually angry, he truly hates the unicorns.

Rocky (Nedzik): A young delver who fears that Gnurflax has gone mad and is leading the delvers into great danger. The King declared him a traitor and stripped him of his name, one of the worst punishments that can be meted out to a delver. Cara gave him his nickname to try to help make up for this.

Namza: The king's wizard, who is concerned by the influence the Whisperer has had on Gnurflax. Attempting to eavesdrop on the King and the Whisperer, he slipped into Stone while trying to avoid detection, and is now trapped there.

Metzram: The king's wizard before Namza. He was Namza's teacher.

Erkza, Gergga, Gratz, Razka, Rendzi, Wurtza, & Zagrat
Rocky's cousins, part of his original cove.

CENTAURS

Arianna: Granddaughter of the Chiron (leader of the centaurs), who tended him until the time of his death. She loves Arkon.

Arkon: A noble centaur who longs to become the new Chiron, now that old Chiron is dead.

OTHER CREATURES

The Squijum: A small, chittery, fast-moving creature who appears a bit like a cross between a squirrel and a monkey. He travels with Cara, and is mostly adorable, but also frequently annoying.

The Dimblethum: A large, slow moving creature who looks something like a bear who began to turn into a man but stopped halfway through the process. He is powerful and gruff, and not friendly with any unicorns save Lightfoot. He was the first to find Cara when she fell into Luster and is very protective of her.

Medafil: A brave but slightly nervous gryphon with a strange speech pattern. He is a loyal friend to Cara — as he was to her grandmother in the days when she was known as the Wanderer.

The Whisperer: A mysterious, unseen being formed when the unicorns attempted a mass ceremony to purge themselves of all that was less than perfect. He is the coalesced form of the darkness that was drawn out of them, a tempter, a seducer, a master of creating trouble and conflict.

PROLOGUE

In the Beginning

He looked at the seed. Glowing gently, it lay cupped in the palm of his enormous hand.

Having to steal the seed to carry out his plan had troubled him, but only a little. Seeds were meant to grow, not be hoarded and hidden away. So stealing this one had seemed, to him, a moral act.

Still, he knew that if his plan were discovered the punishment would be great.

In his other hand he held the remnants of a fallen star. This, too, was forbidden, for despite its fall, the star's power was enormous, and not allowed to those of his level.

Again, this troubled him but little.

In truth, it was neither the seed nor the star that weighed heavy in his thoughts. It was the blood. To shed blood — even his own, which was what he intended — was the highest crime of all. Yet what he had in mind could not be done without it. Absent that life-giving fluid, the seed and the star were worthless.

He hesitated. If what he was about to do were discovered the consequences might be horrendous. But the urgent need he felt to begin this sacred act of creation could not be denied. He took a deep breath, then

pressed the seed into the still warm star. Then he took a knife from his belt and drew its finely honed blade across his palm.

His blood, silvery-crimson and warm, oozed out and fell onto the seed, which quickened at its touch.

He smiled.

It had begun.

DAY TWO OF THE INVASION

continued

It is a pity that Earth has lost its dragons, for they added immeasurably to the strangeness of our world. This, it seemed to me, was a good thing.

–Bellenmore the Magician, Memoirs of a Mage

(Unpublished)

1

The Trembling World

Luster: A Dragon Cave on Dark Mountain

Graumag had listened intently as Cara told the story of how she had first come to Luster by using the amulet her grandmother had given her — of how she had leaped from the tower of St. Christopher’s and fallen into this world.

"Fascinating," said the dragon, nodding her enormous head. "Please, do continue."

Cara continued, telling the dragon the story of her first meeting with Prince Lightfoot and the Dimblethum, and of how the two of them had helped her make her way across the wilderness to bring her grandmother’s message, “The Wanderer is weary,” to the old Queen, Arabella Skydancer.

"Squijum came, too!" squeaked the small, furry creature that was sitting on Cara's shoulder.

"Yes, you came too," Cara said. "And without you, the trip might have been a disaster!"

"Squijum good!" said the little gray creature, sounding satisfied.

Cara picked up the threads of the story, being especially detailed, for she thought it would interest Graumag, when she recounted how she had met the dragon Firethroat and been given the gift of tongues.

All that covered, she told the story of her quest to fetch her grandmother back to Luster, of her confrontations with Beloved, and of the startling discovery that her grandmother was actually a unicorn who had been transformed into human shape . . . and was now in her true form, Amalia Flickerfoot, Queen of the Unicorns.

The girl noticed that the dragon seemed to pay particular attention to this last part.

“Hmmm,” murmured Graumag at last, gazing at Cara from between half-closed eyes, “So you are actually one-quarter unicorn yourself.”

“Yes, I am.”

The dragon stared at her for a long time. Finally she said, “Well, lass, that was one of the strangest tales I have ever heard, and certainly worth the price I agreed to, which was to listen to your request. Therefore, you may now tell me what it is you came to ask.”

Cara bowed low. Returning to the formal language of the dragons, she spoke the words she had memorized so carefully. “I come with this plea from my grandmother, Amalia Flickerfoot, Queen of the Unicorns. She says: 'The Last Hunt is upon us. Beloved and her army of Hunters have invaded Luster, with the intent of slaying every unicorn in Luster. We pray you will come to our assistance in this time of trial and danger. The bonds between dragon and unicorn have never been strong. Even so, we share this world and we both know that the invasion of humans will not be good for any of us, whether unicorn or dragon. Please, then, join with us, not only for our sake, but for the sake of Luster.'”

When she finished, Cara’s throat felt scorched. She bowed once more, then held her breath as she awaited Graumag’s reply.

Cara had expected the dragon to bargain or demand some price in return for her aid. But after a long silence Graumag simply nodded and said, “You are right, lass. Though I have been friendlier with humans than most of my kind —” She broke off and looked away, as if some memory had brought her sudden pain.

Cara waited respectfully, though it took all the self-control she possessed not to shout, “Yes, yes, go on!”

Finally Graumag shook her head and said, “These humans . . . these Hunters . . . do not belong here. For that reason, and because of the kindness your grandmother once showed me while she was in human form, I will help.”

Cara could barely refrain from leaping forward to hug the dragon, though there was actually no good place on Graumag to deliver a hug. Instead, she said, “Shall we go, then?”

The dragon shook her massive head. “I’ve flown enough for one night. We’ll wait until morning.”

Cara bit back her impatience. The dragon was doing her an enormous favor, and she knew it would not be proper to push her to leave right this moment.

“You’ll find some silks and furs in the second chamber behind us,” said Graumag. “They should make your sleep more comfortable.”

By the light of Medafil’s sphere, Cara found her way to the chamber. Knowing that dragons were both treasure collectors and treasure guardians, she expected to find a vast trove, as she had in the caves of Ebillan and Firethroat. To her surprise, the chamber was almost empty. Aside from the bedding Graumag had promised, she found a few golden cups and a

scattering of religious relics, but that was it. Puzzled, Cara gathered the finest linens she had ever felt and returned to the front of the cave, where she arranged a cozy bed for herself. Before long, all three of them — girl, dragon, and Squijum — were asleep.

Cara was roused by a strange sound. Opening her eyes to darkness, at first she wasn't sure where she was. Then a sizzle of lightning illumined — briefly — the massive shape nearby, and she remembered that she was in Graumag's cave.

But what had woken her? The Squijum, who was snuggled next to her, stirred. "Shhh," she whispered. He patted her cheek to let her know he understood.

For several moments they lay silent, listening. Finally the sound came again, and this time Cara realized what it was: Graumag was weeping. She was tempted to offer the dragon comfort, but was not sure it was a good idea. What, after all, was proper under the circumstances? Dragons were proud beasts, and comfort from a human girl might not be welcome.

The question became more complicated when she realized the dragon was still sleeping. Would she want to be wakened, to be freed from whatever dream troubled her sleep? Or would her dragonly pride be affronted to know a mere girl had heard her in her sorrow?

The need to make a choice was removed by a shaking of the mountain that brought them all to full wakefulness. The Squijum leaped, shrieking, to Cara's shoulder. She stroked his fur, as much to calm herself as to calm him.

When the tremor — which lasted for moments but felt like hours — had passed, Graumag said softly, “It won’t be much longer.”

“What won’t be much longer?” whispered Cara.

“Luster is starting to tear itself apart. I don’t believe it will last more than another few days.”

Cara’s stomach twisted in horror. “What do you mean? Why do you say that?”

“I have been here for hundreds of years, lass. In all that time there has never been an earthquake — not here on Dark Mountain, not anywhere in Luster that I know of. Moreover, I happen to know a little of this world and where it came from. If this Beloved has violated its core in the way I suspect she has, then she has endangered the very thing that makes it solid.”

“Yike,” said the Squijum softly.

“Yes,” echoed Graumag. “Yike.”

2

Martha Learns the Truth

Luster: The Wilderness

At the words “Your mother was born a unicorn princess,” Martha Hunter leaped to her feet and turned to walk away from her husband.

Ian grabbed her arm.

“Let go!” Martha hissed, trying to yank free. “I don’t need a fairy tale, Ian. I need the truth!”

He didn’t let go. Taking her other arm, his own voice fierce, he said, “Look around, Martha! We thought we knew the limits of reality, but our sense of the world was too small. You’ve been held prisoner in a world of light, put there by my ancestress who is more centuries old than we can imagine. Unless you let go of what you think is possible, you cannot understand your own life.”

She sighed and seemed to collapse a bit. He led her back to the branch, lifted her to sit on it, held her hands while he gazed into her eyes and said once more, “Your mother was born a unicorn princess.”

He went on, repeating the story he had so recently learned from Lightfoot. “Your mother’s true name was Amalia Flickerfoot. She was a wanderer, so obsessed with Earth that her own mother, the unicorn queen,

had had a spell prepared so that if Amalia's life were threatened by Hunters she could transform herself into a human.”

Martha put a hand to her mouth and shook her head.

Relentless, Ian continued, explaining how finally using the spell had cost Amalia the memory of her unicorn life, and how she had gone on to live on Earth as Ivy Morris, human girl, then human woman, then mother, and then grandmother. But she was always haunted by the sense that there were people after her. She was told she was delusional, even institutionalized. But she was not delusional. Hunters really were tracking her, always tracking her. She managed to stay one step ahead of them . . . until the night that he, her own son-in-law, finally caught up with her.

“Only I passed her by that night,” he said, “because my true goal was Cara. I followed our daughter here to Luster. But in the end, she bested me.” He smiled ruefully. “That is one reason I am not in a state of pure terror for her, Martha. I know very well how resourceful that child of ours has become.”

Martha had continued to listen without comment, as if the strangeness of the story had rendered her mute. But when her husband was all done, she said, “Where is my mother now?”

“According to what Lightfoot told me, she has regained her true form and now reigns as the Queen of the unicorns. That is all I know, as this has been my first contact with Lightfoot since I set off on my hunt to free you from the Rainbow Prison."

Martha reached out to stroke his cheek. “And for that gallant act,” she said softly, “I am willing to forgive a great deal.”

He began to weep.

She stepped down from the branch, took him in her arms. “Ian, what is it?”

He shook his head. He wanted to tell her more, tell her of the bargain he had made with the Blind Man in order to gain the information he needed to find her, and how that man could now take over his eyes anytime he wanted to use them himself. But in the end all he could say was, “I’ve missed you so much.”

Later, when they had both wept themselves dry and given up on talking, Martha lay nestled in Ian’s arms, still unable to sleep. She stared at the moonlight filtering through the weave of silvery branches above her, trying to sort through it all.

The story about her mother was preposterous. She wanted — needed! — to believe it was a lie. Yet hearing it gave her own life — the strangely abrupt moves of her childhood, the odd and unexpected terrors, even the horror of having her own mother kidnap her daughter — a shape and pattern that, finally, began to make sense.

She held her hands crossed tightly over her chest, clasping her upper arms as if to keep herself from flying apart, as if to keep her heart in place.

“My mother was born a unicorn,” she whispered to herself over and over again. “What does that make me?”

And then, even more desperately, *“What does it make my daughter?”*

3

A Pair of Warriors

Luster: The Wilderness

The unicorn Belle, having succumbed to the lure of a maiden lost in the wood, expected sudden death once she stepped into the clearing. So she was astonished to find that the maiden sat wide-eyed and trembling, as if awaiting death herself. Puzzled, Belle walked toward the girl. Clearly she was one of Beloved's minions, brought here to draw unicorns to their doom. So why was there no attack from Hunters? Where were the arrows and spears she had anticipated? Was the girl alone? If that were the case, why did she not flee? Surely if she had been brought to Luster by Beloved she must believe that all unicorns were fearsome beasts, ready to savage maidens such as herself.

To Belle's surprise, not only did the girl not flee, she did not even rise, but simply spread her arms, almost as if inviting attack.

Now what do I do? thought Belle.

Knowing that the girl was not in real danger caused the compulsion that had pulled Belle toward her to fade. She could, if she wanted, simply turn and walk away. But the look on the girl's face — somehow defiant,

defeated, pleading, angry, and heartbroken all at the same time — made the unicorn want to discover why she was here, what she was thinking.

Of course, there was only one way to do that.

Well, this will be the test, thought Belle, expecting the girl to leap to her feet and run when she stepped closer.

The girl confounded her by remaining stockstill.

Belle hesitated. Could this be a trap after all? But if so, what were the Hunters waiting for? Why did they not spring out and attack?

Belle stood in puzzlement for several breaths before taking another step forward. The girl was lovely, her jet-black hair and almond-shaped eyes reminding Belle somewhat of Li Yun, the tiny acrobat who was part of that ridiculous group called The Queen's Players.

Belle stepped closer. Still the girl made no effort to flee. However, her trembling grew worse, as if she were expecting some terrible punishment.

Belle whickered gently, trying to calm her.

The girl blinked, as if surprised, but did not cease her trembling.

Belle took one more step, then lowered her head. The girl flinched, yet held her place. Setting the tip of her horn at the center of the girl's chest Belle pushed quickly, piercing the flesh. The girl's eyes widened and she cried out, not in pain, but initially in fear, then in astonishment.

Belle stepped back, withdrawing her horn. No blood stained the spot where she had pierced the girl's flesh, for the wound had healed the moment she pulled her horn away. Only a small rip in the stained white garment indicated what had just happened.

The look on the girl's face turned to one of extreme confusion — a confusion that turned to amazement when Belle slowly lifted a hoof and

placed it on the girl's leg so she could send the thought, "I did that so we could speak to each other."

The girl shrieked and leapt to her feet, then backed away, staring at the unicorn in awe. Yet she did not run.

Belle waited. After a moment the girl raised a tentative hand. It trembled as she laid it against Belle's neck.

"That's right," thought Belle. "We have to be in contact for this to work."

Speaking aloud, the girl said, "I thought you were going to kill me!"

"Don't talk! Just *think.* You have to think what you want me to understand."

The girl nodded and tried again. "I thought you were going to kill me."

Belle snorted angrily and replied mind-to-mind, "You've been lied to! That is not our way."

The girl stared at her for a long time before answering, "I believe you."

This was followed by a moment of blankness, as if they were not connected after all. Then, as if some wall had broken, a flood of memory poured out of her, horrible images of waiting in a clearing, knowing that she was being used as bait to draw a unicorn to its death and thinking it was the right thing to do. Then the arrival of the unicorn itself, then the first arrow . . .

Belle drew back, raging and furious. She was tempted to rear up and pummel the girl with her hooves, to slash and lacerate her for what she had been part of.

Stop! she commanded herself. *She is little more than a child, and she has been lied to for who knows how long.* The warrior stood for a moment,

breathing deeply, trying to regain control — to convince herself of her own words. Finally she stepped forward again.

The girl, who was weeping, reached up to touch her neck. “I’m sorry!” she thought desperately. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t know. I didn’t understand.”

“But why are you now here by yourself?”

More memories came flooding out — the girl’s sudden horror when she watched the killing of the unicorn, her subsequent flight through the woods, her attempts to hide her trail from the Hunters. . . .

“I believe you,” thought Belle.

“I didn’t mean to let that first memory come out of me,” continued the girl. “When you came into the clearing I thought you meant to kill me for what I had done. Or just for the sake of killing me. Either way, I felt I deserved it. But when you didn’t . . .” Her thought trailed off, as if she could find no satisfactory conclusion for it.

“Piercing your heart was the only way I could establish communication,” explained Belle. “But when you showed me what had happened . . .”

Here her own thought trailed off. Stepping away from the girl, she asked herself, *Why did I do that? I didn’t need to talk to her. Now that I’ve done it, what do I do with her?*

The girl stepped forward. Touching Belle’s neck again, she thought, “You’re very beautiful.”

Belle snorted. “I don’t care about being beautiful. I am part of the queen’s guard. I am a warrior.”

“Oh, a warrior! I know a great deal about war.”

“What would you know about war?”

The thought came out a bit more sharply than Belle had intended.

The girl's eyes flashed. Fiercely she replied, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself, but not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

Belle stepped back so she could look at the girl more carefully. The girl glared at her, as if daring a contradiction. Belle nudged her lightly with her nose, then sent, "That is not your own thought."

"Of course not. The words are from Sun Tzu."

"Who is Sun Tzu?"

"He is no longer. He lived over two thousand years ago. When it came to the waging of war he was the wisest man of his age, perhaps of any age. My teacher, Wu Chen, loved his book, *The Art of War* and taught me from it endlessly. I can recite most of it by heart."

Again Belle backed away to study the girl. Finally she stepped forward once more and, placing her cheek next to the girl's, asked, "What is your name?"

"I am called Feng Yuan."

"And I am Belle. Would you like to come with me?"

"Where are you going?"

"To join the rest of the unicorns, in the hope that we can survive the Great Hunt that Beloved has launched against us."

Feng Yuan smiled. "Sun Tzu teaches us that one of the keys to victory is knowing the enemy's condition."

"And can you tell us something about that?"

“The enemy’s condition? I can indeed. You are lucky to have found me, for Sun Tzu proclaims that knowledge such as this is best gained by the use of spies. Not only that, he says that the most useful of all spies is the converted one.”

“The converted spy?”

“One who was part of the enemy, but now is on your side. That would be me.” Feng Yuan smiled. “Of course, Sun Tzu also says that it is essential that converted spies be treated with the utmost liberality.”

“What is ‘utmost liberality’?”

“That means you should give me a lot of treasure.” When Belle didn’t answer right away, Feng Yuan said quickly, “I did not really mean it. Because of what I did, there was a death. I owe the unicorns a great debt, a debt I can never erase. Whatever I can do toward repaying it will be treasure enough.”

“Then come with me, and I will give you your chance for treasure.”

“Where are we going?” asked Feng Yuan again.

“To Amalia Flickerfoot, the Queen of the unicorns. She has need of the knowledge you say you can offer.”

“Thank you,” replied Feng Yuan. “I do not think I could go on living if I could not do something to atone for my crime.”

As they left the clearing Belle could not help but wonder if finding Feng Yuan was a marvelous piece of luck, or if the Whisperer had led her to the girl in order to create more mischief.

4

Graumag's Story

Luster: Graumag's Cave

Though no additional tremors troubled the cave on Dark Mountain, sleep for Cara and Graumag was impossible. After a long silence, the dragon said softly, “Before we were roused by the tremor, I was having an unhappy dream.”

Something about the way she said this made Cara think it was an invitation and a question. Gathering her courage, she replied, “Yes, I heard you weeping.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“It’s all right. I won’t tell anyone.”

Graumag laughed. “I do not live in such a state of pride that I care if anyone knows I weep, lass. I simply did not want to burden you with my sorrows.”

“I know a fair amount when it comes to sorrow,” said Cara, feeling oddly adult.

After another silence Graumag said, “Yes, I suspect you do.”

The darkness of the cave seemed to invite a closeness, an intimacy. Gathering her courage, Cara said, “I already know that most of Earth’s

dragons went to a different world. How is it that you are one of the seven who came to Luster?”

Graumag sighed heavily, causing the flames at the edges of her nostrils to flare a bit. “That is a long story, Cara Diana Hunter.”

“We have time between now and morning,” replied Cara softly. “And I’m not sure how much sleep we’re going to get under the circumstances.”

In the darkness all Cara could see were the circles of flame that lined Graumag’s nostrils. When they moved up and down it took the girl a moment to realize that the dragon was nodding agreement. Despite this gesture, several minutes passed before Graumag said ruefully, “I did not fit into the world where the others had gone.”

“Why is that?” asked Cara, who was quite used to not fitting in.

Another long silence followed. When Graumag finally did begin to speak, her voice was soft, as if the memories were hard to pull up and painful to recount.

“My name, when I was born, was May Margret, of Arlesboro Castle. I was not a dragon at the time, of course. That did not happen until later.”

“You were born a human?” asked Cara, fascinated.

Graumag sighed, causing the flames around her nostrils to flare again. “It began when my mother died and my father remarried.”

“Oh, so you had a wicked stepmother!”

The circles of flame indicated that Graumag was shaking her head no. “Oh, I confess that I did consider her wicked for a while, especially after she transformed me into a dragon. But that was before I understood her part of the story.”

Cara blinked, confused, and wondered if anything was ever as simple as it first seemed.

“You may know the bones of the tale,” continued Graumag. “It’s been told many times, though changed again and again in the telling, as these things usually are. The short version is, my stepmother changed me to a laidly worm.”

“A worm? Just a worm?”

Graumag actually laughed. “In older times, dragons were often referred to as ‘worms’.”

“And what is *laidly?”*

“It meant ugly or loathsome. My stepmother put this transformation on me, and the only cure for it was for my brother, Childe Wynde, to come back from across the sea and kiss me three times before sunset on the day of his return.”

“If he was a child, why was he across the sea?”

“That’s ‘Childe’ with an ‘e’ at the end. It was a formal title in those days. It meant Wynde was the designated heir and would be lord of the castle after our father died.”

“Ah, I see. And I do remember hearing something like this once. But didn’t the brother in that story actually come back and turn the dragon — turn you — human again?”

“Exactly!”

Cara shook her head, more confused than ever. “Then why are you a dragon now?”

“Well, books and storytellers often like to stop at the happy ending. But there’s more — quite a bit more — to my tale. However, if I am to tell it, I

will have to ask you to stop interrupting and just let me do this in my own way."

"You heard the lady," said Cara to the Squijum. "No talking."

"Hotcha quiet!" agreed the Squijum. Climbing into her lap he clutched his tail and settled down to listen.

"After my transformation," began Graumag, "I coiled myself around the top of a high, narrow hill called the Spindlestone. From there I could watch the sea, aching and eager for my brother's return.

"Happily, Childe Wynde did indeed return, did indeed kiss me three times before the set of that day's sun. Once I had shifted back to human form, he wrapped me in his cloak and carried me to the castle. Together we climbed the stairs to the tower room where my stepmother had worked her magic. Holding my hand, Wynde struck my stepmother with a wand of rowan wood. The power that had turned me into a dragon — Transformational Magic, it's called, and it was still trapped inside me — flowed out of me and into Wynde, through Wynde and along the rowan wood, and finally into my stepmother.

"To my delight, she began to wither and shrink, finally turning into a large and loathsome toad. Then she hopped away, down the tower stairs and into the dungeons."

Cara had indeed heard this tale, in a slightly different form. It was one of the many her grandmother used to tell her.

"But that was not the end of my story," said Graumag. "In fact, it was only the beginning."

5

Arkon and Arianna

Luster: The Valley of the Centaurs

The centaur Arkon stood just outside his cave, honing the edge of his sword. The metal of his blade glistened in the light of the bracket-mounted torches — as did the sweat that coated his muscular arms and chest. He was calm, despite the test that lay ahead. He was confident, too. Though the centaurs had not held a combat to choose a new Chiron in the hundreds of years since they came to Luster, he had been studying the rules — and the necessary fighting skills — from before the time he could leave his mother's side. With his friend Basilikos, he had sparred and jousted and tussled through all the years of his youth, readying himself for this great event.

He was grateful the old Chiron hadn't died too soon; otherwise he, Arkon, could not have been ready for this moment.

Instantly he felt a flash of guilt for the ignoble thought. The old Chiron had been wise and good. Unfortunately he had also been tired. That was natural enough, given his oddly extended life, but it had meant that the centaurs, as a people, had been stagnant ever since they came to Luster. Now that the human girl, Cara, had provided the old Chiron with the death

he so deeply desired, it was time for a new leader, with new ideas and fresh energy.

And, perhaps, thought Arkon, sliding the whetstone along his blade again, *time for us to move beyond the restrictions of this valley and take a larger place in Luster . . . no matter what the unicorns say.*

He extended his arm, raising the sword high enough to catch the moonlight instead of the torchlight. Though the Blood Moon was now two nights gone, in his mind the blade gleamed red, anyway.

He lowered the sword, then placed it carefully in the ornately decorated leather scabbard he had made from the hide of his first kill, one of the deerlike creatures that roamed the valley's sides.

The initial stages of tomorrow's test would not be dangerous — more like games, really. But the four centaurs who emerged as winners of those contests would face one another in a series of genuine battles, battles meant to determine who would be the new Chiron. Having studied past contests, Arkon knew it was unlikely all four of the final contenders would survive the day, at least not without severe wounds. This did not disturb him. Combat for the Chironate was an ancient tradition. He had longed to be part of it during all the decades since he had first swung a sword.

The sound of hooves upon stone alerted him that someone was coming. A moment later a familiar voice called softly from the darkness, "Arkon, I need to speak to you."

"Come closer, Arianna."

The centaur princess stepped around a boulder, entering the circle of torchlight at the front of his cave. Arkon was surprised to see that her face was troubled, almost pained. He spread his arms, welcoming her to his

embrace. She moved into it easily, sliding her own arms around his broad shoulders. Though Arkon was glad of her familiar touch, he felt uneasy, for he knew the Princess to be stoic of mind and not usually given to emotional displays. She had wept profusely after the death of her many-times great-grandfather, of course, both in public and then secretly, here in his cave, sobbing against his chest. But that was different. Rubbing his face against her thick, chestnut hair, he murmured, “What is it, my love?”

Arianna took a deep breath, then said, “I am leaving the valley tonight.”

Arkon pulled back, astonished. “Leaving? Why? And why *now?”*

“Because something has gone terribly wrong. You must know that, Arkon. These tremors disturbing the land — there’s never been anything like them. We already know, from what Cara told us, that Beloved has been trying to find a way into Luster. I cannot help but think these shakings are a sign that she has done so.”

“What does that have to do with us?”

“We live here, too!”

“But this . . . this *Beloved* is not after the centaurs. It’s the unicorns she wants. And they are hardly friends of ours. So it doesn’t matter to us.”

Arianna’s eyes widened, and Arkon was startled by the anger he saw in her face. “Do you really believe that?”

“That they are not friends of ours? Of course!”

“No! That it doesn’t matter to us. Arkon, this world — this *little* world — is all we have left to us. It's not as if there is yet another world that we could flee to if we lose this one! I don’t know what, if anything, we can do about what now threatens Luster. But I feel we must go outside the valley and try to find out.”

“Arianna, you know what tomorrow is.”

She paused, then said, “That’s exactly why I want to leave now. It will be easier while no one is in charge. The new Chiron will likely forbid such a trip. Better to go before that can happen.”

“If that is what you truly want to do, once I am Chiron I will defy the ban on leaving and make it possible.”

She sighed, and it was Arkon’s turn to be angry. “Such faith!” he said sarcastically. “Do you not believe I will triumph tomorrow?”

“Of course I do. But I am not *sure* of it. And besides . . .”

Her voice trailed off.

“Besides what? What is it, Arianna?”

“I do not want to see you fight. Maybe see you wounded. Maybe . . .” Her voice caught. “Maybe see you killed. Oh, I cannot watch it, Arkon. Come with me, dear heart, come with me. This is more important. Please come with me!”

“But the Chironate . . .”

“This is more important!”

“Arianna, this is my chance — my only chance — to ascend to being Chiron. I have waited for this all my life.”

“And dealing with whatever has caused Luster to begin this shaking may be the only chance for all of us to live. Think, Arkon! What good will being Chiron do you if our world itself is lost?”

"And what will the others think of me should I disappear before tomorrow? I will be labelled a coward from that day forward."

Arianna pushed away from him. "So you are more afraid of being called a coward than you are of Luster crumbling beneath us? What kind of weak

heart fears harsh words when the whole world is at stake? What kind of Chiron will you be if you fear the opinion of others too much to do what is right?"

"Arianna — "

"Say no more!" she snapped, holding up a hand. "Love can only bear so much disappointment."

Arkon sighed and looked past her, out toward the valley that had been both home and prison for as long as he could remember. Arianna sighed and moved back closer to him. She placed a hand upon his cheek and turned his head so that he was once again looking into her eyes. “I leave an hour before dawn," she whispered. “You know where to meet me if you decide to join me.”

Then she stepped away and vanished among the shadows.

6

Strange Companions

Luster: The Wilderness

Feng Yuan was coming to a remarkable conclusion.

She was happy.

It was not a feeling she was used to.

The girl wasn't sure when the happiness had begun to creep over her. This was partly because traveling with Belle had been nerve-wracking at first. Despite the way her beliefs about the unicorns had changed, time and again she would experience either a sudden wash of fear or a sense that she was enacting some great betrayal. Both feelings, of course, were lingering effects of the hateful lies about unicorns that had been drilled into her head during her years in Beloved's castle. Such training does not fade easily. Yet she had only to place her hand on Belle's shoulder, only to sense the connection they shared, and the bad feelings would evaporate. She didn't even need to trade thoughts with the unicorn for this to happen; the connection itself was enough.

"What?" asked Belle, one time when Feng Yuan reached out to touch her. "What is it?"

"I just needed to be sure you are real and that I have not lost my mind."

“I’m fairly certain I’m real. I have no idea whether or not you have lost your mind.” Startled at herself for making a joke, Belle hesitated, then added, “Would you like to ride on my back? We’ll travel faster that way.”

“Oh, yes, please!” cried Feng Yuan. She had been longing to do just that, but had been shy of asking.

“Climb on.”

The girl scrambled onto the unicorn’s back.

“Have you ridden before?”

“No.”

“All right, we’ll take this easy for a bit. Lock your knees against my sides. You can also use your hands to grip my mane. But try not to pull it! I might bite.”

“Maybe I should walk.”

“That was another joke. I guess I’m not very good at them.”

“No, no, it is my fault,” said Feng Yuan quickly, as she wound her fingers into Belle’s silky mane. “We did not laugh much in Beloved’s castle. I need to learn about jokes.”

“Well, that makes two of us. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then here we go!”

If Feng Yuan had been happy before, her heart now fairly burst with joy. The world around them was unutterably beautiful. The air was pure and sweet. And she was riding a unicorn.

They moved more swiftly now, which had been the real reason for Belle’s invitation to let Feng Yuan ride. She was anxious to get back to Autumngrove and join forces with the other unicorns. Even more, she was

eager to present the girl and her odd wisdom regarding warfare to the Queen.

As Feng Yuan became more comfortable with riding, Belle picked up her pace. All unicorns could travel for great distances without tiring, and Belle was in better shape than most. Indeed, it was Feng Yuan who had to occasionally beg for a rest, as she was not used to using the muscles required for riding.

At one such stop, beside a narrow stream, she plucked a golden flower. Placing her free hand on Belle's shoulder she asked shyly, "May I put this in your mane?"

To her own surprise, Belle agreed, wondering to herself, *What is it about humans that can make the ones not trying to kill you so endearing?*

They traveled well into the night. When Belle finally decided to stop for a rest she chose a site well-situated to defend. "We'll have to watch for both Hunters and delvers," she explained to Feng Yuan.

"Delvers?"

"Vicious little creatures," Belle began with disgust. Then she paused, recalling the Chiron's strange tale about how the delvers had been created as a result of the strange and misguided ceremony in which the unicorns had tried to purge themselves of all imperfections. The story still troubled her, especially the idea that it was this ceremony that led to the existence of the Whisperer, who in turn had corrupted a band of dwarfs to become the delvers. She knew that if Cara had not managed to bring word of it to the

Queen, then it would fall to her, Belle, to do so when she reached Autumngrove. So she might as well practice it now.

With a sigh, she said, “Let me tell you a story.”

Later, standing between the roots of a large tree while the girl slept curled beneath her, Belle reflected on how odd it was that telling the tale of the Whisperer and the delvers had caused her to feel some sympathy for the delvers. What strange power did telling a story have, that it could open her heart like this?

“It’s a lie,” whispered a voice from somewhere in the darkness. “The Chiron just made it up so that foolish girl, Cara, would agree to kill him.”

Belle shook her head. *The lies are all yours,* she thought fiercely. *I reject you. Go away.*

To her surprise, the Whisperer did.

In the middle of that same night, Belle — who was in the standing sleep preferred by most unicorns — cried out suddenly.

Feng Yuan woke instantly, scrambled to her feet, and put her hand on the unicorn’s side. “What is it?” she thought. “Are you all right?”

“A unicorn has just been killed,” answered Belle, who knew, as did all the unicorns, when one of their own had been slain.

Feng Yuan wailed and buried her face in Belle’s side, awash with guilt even though she had had no part in this crime.

Sleep was impossible after that. In time, they decided to push on through the dark toward Autumngrove.

7

What the Storytellers Left Out

Luster: Dark Mountain

A massive bolt of lightning streaked down outside Graumag's cave. The dragon waited for the thunder that followed close on to fade before continuing her tale. When all was silent, she said into the darkness, "What the storytellers did not like to speak of was the courage it took for my brother to give me those kisses. Oh, they said it was brave because I was so hideous, which was true enough. But braver still was the way Wynde endured the heat that pulsed around me.

"What the storytellers chose to leave out was the tremendous pain my brother suffered as he tried to free me.

"And what the storytellers decided to pretend never happened, because they *will* have their princes handsome, is that in the moments it took for Wynde to give me those kisses, the fierce heat of my breath scarred him dreadfully, in ways both visible and hidden."

"Visible *and* hidden?" asked Cara.

Graumag sighed. "After Wynde rescued me, the right side of his once fair face was hideously scarred. Often, when he did not know I was watching, I would see him run his fingers over the scars, which were rough and ridged.

He would close his eyes, and sometimes a tear would run down along those unsightly marks. But his scars were not only on the outside. Even worse for his heart, it turned out that he could no longer produce an heir."

Graumag fell silent for a time. At last she said, "And here is the final thing, the thing the storytellers never knew at all: Once you have been a dragon, it is hard to be mere maiden once again. Though I was, at first, relieved to be back in my own skin, I soon found myself longing for the strength and power I had possessed when I was a dragon. I ached for the wings that had carried me high into the sky, and for the way hot blood tasted when it poured down my throat after I had swooped in to capture a sheep or a roe deer and then killed it in one bite. There was a fire in my blood, and it would not go away. Finally I sought the advice of a wisewoman called Old Nell."

Graumag sighed, causing a gust of warm air to flow past Cara. Then she continued her story.

It would be some time before I learned that 'Old Nell' was something far different from what she was pretending to be. So I took her seriously when she told me that if I truly desired to return to dragon form, I must fetch my stepmother, the toad queen, from her place of banishment in the depths beneath the castle. Her instructions were clear: I was to wrap my toadly stepmother in a cloth, being careful not to touch her. From that cloth, which would absorb some of the magic, the old woman claimed she could brew a potion that would return me to dragon form. She cautioned me again that if I were to touch the toad, it would muddy the magic, then sent me home.

I did not go underground at once, for I was far from sure that this was really what I wanted — especially as the old woman made it clear that if I became dragon again, there would be no second chance at humanity. I might never have gone at all, if not for the dreams. But I would dream at night . . . dream of flying, dream of wings. More alarming, I would often wake to find myself standing on the castle's parapet, as if I had been about to fling myself over in a fatal attempt to fly. So in time I made the journey, descending far deeper into the earth than I had expected. It turned out there were strange things below Arlesboro Castle. Strange things indeed, horrible and disquieting. One room in particular. . .

Graumag's voice trailed off, and she shuddered, as if with a fearsome memory. After a brief silence she shook her head and began again.

I returned to the world above, bearing my stepmother wrapped carefully in a cloth, just as I had been instructed.

From that cloth the old wisewoman brewed the potion she had promised, which she gave to me in a little bottle of emerald green glass.

Oddly, I found that simply having this potion gave me, for a time, the strength to resist the dragon-desire. It was as if knowing that I could *return to dragon form somehow soothed the longing in my heart. Yet the desire was always there, sometimes a raging fire, sometimes just an ember, but never totally extinguished.*

Now in this time something else very strange happened. My stepmother, who I should have hated — who I did *hate — convinced me to keep her in my room. She did this by claiming that it was better for me to have her close at hand, where I could keep an eye on her, than to dump her in the swamp, which had been my original plan. She told me that if I did that, she would soon be back, causing mischief I could not keep track of. This made just enough sense — she was a master of persuasion — that I agreed to let her stay with me.*

To my surprise, she soon began to give me very good advice, claiming that all she had ever wanted was to protect the kingdom.

Then, as if my life were not complicated enough already, Wynde — no longer 'Childe' Wynde, for our father had died and my brother now ruled the kingdom — announced he had chosen a husband for me. Though we did not speak of it, I knew that one reason Wynde was eager for me to wed was that the fire of my breath had unmanned him and he could father no children of his own. So he felt a desperate need for me to produce an heir of our blood to follow him on the throne. Though we knew nothing of that at the time, we learned later that attempting to deprive the family of a new generation was part of the plot against us.

Despite understanding Wynde's desire for me to produce an heir, I was angry at him for trying to push marriage on me. We fought bitterly. That ended when I finally met my proposed husband who turned out to be charming, handsome, and — worst of all — witty. In short, he was irresistible, and against my will I fell in love with him. This was the last thing I needed — though, as it turned out, far from the last of the surprises in store for me.

When the day of our wedding arrived, I went to be married in a state of hope, desire, and fear. Perhaps this is true of all brides. However, I do not believe any bride has ever brought to her wedding ceremony anything like what I carried hidden in my basket of flowers. Two things, actually. The first was the little green bottle holding the potion I had been told would turn me back into a dragon. I thought of this as my escape route, should I decide I could not go through with the wedding. Why would I decide against it? Because I was worried not only about my own divided heart, but about not being fair to my groom. He was a good man and did not know what he would have been marrying.

The second thing in the basket was my toadly stepmother.

"You brought your wicked stepmother to your wedding?" cried Cara in astonishment.

"As I said, she had become a trusted advisor." Graumag paused for a long time. When she spoke again her voice was distant, as if she wanted to separate herself from what she was saying. "It was at the wedding that I finally learned the truth of how Wynde and I had been manipulated by my stepmother's family — including the 'old wisewoman,' who had brewed the potion and was neither old nor a woman."

"I don't understand!"

"The person I had thought of as 'Old Nell' was actually my stepmother's father in disguise! His 'advice' had been designed to get me to bring his daughter back from the underground world, since the magic prevented her from returning on her own."

“What were they after? Money? The castle?”

Graumag shook her head. Noticeably uneasy, she said, “They wanted neither money nor land, but something deeper and more fierce. Their goal was to end our bloodline forever, and wipe our family from the face of the earth.”

“That’s horrible! Why would they want to do such a thing?”

The dragon sighed again. “The reason, when I learned it, was indeed horrible, more horrible than I could have guessed, though I had had a clue when I went underground. In truth, Cara, it broke my heart, for it turned out that my father, who I had loved, had done great wrong, great evil . . .”

For a long time the only sound was the occasional boom of now-distant thunder and, once, the grinding of the stone from a slight tremor. Cara remained silent, too, though she was itching with curiosity. But she could sense that the dragon was not eager to speak of this next thing, whatever it was. And it hardly felt safe to ask her.

Finally Graumag said, “You are quiet.”

Deciding to reply in the tongue of the dragons, Cara said, “A story like this must not be rushed.”

“You are wise for one so young.”

Cara continued her silence, which seemed the safest course.

After some time, Graumag picked up the threads of her tale.

I do not wish to speak in detail of what my father had done. I will tell you only that when I went to fetch my toadly stepmother from the depths beneath the castle I passed through a room that clearly had one purpose and one purpose only, which was to cause pain.

I see the question in your eyes, child. Yes, I am avoiding the word, for to speak it fills me with shame for my father. But the word is torture. Torture most vile. But then, all torture is vile. I had tried to tell myself, after that journey, that the implements of evil I had seen in that dreadful chamber were relics of a distant past, not anything that had been used during my own lifetime. But that day in the chapel, I was forced to understand that the devices in that room had been applied to my stepmother's father. Which explains everything you need to know about why that family was bent on destroying us. You cannot commit such acts, cause such life-changing pain, and not expect the wheel to turn against you.

What happened next was . . . unexpected. Torn by sorrow, by anger, most of all by horror, I decided to flee my human shape. But when I drank the potion that was supposed to return me to dragon form, it proved to be yet another deception. As it turned out, our enemies did not want me to become a dragon again, for fear I would be too powerful. So they had lied to me about how it could be done. It was all false.

In my fury, I picked up my toadly stepmother, planning to shake the truth out of her. As you will remember, I had been warned not to touch her, and this was the first time I had done so since her entoadment. The moment I laid hands on her I understood the reason for that warning: It turned out that holding her in my hands was actually the secret. Once my skin was against hers the Transformational Magic that had first endragoned me, and

that had later flowed from me, through Wynde, through the rowan wand, to cause her own metamorphosis, flowed back into my body. The pain was dreadful, for a change such as this rends muscle and bone and sinew, even as it re-creates them in a new shape. Moments later I was once more a dragon.

My longing to devour them was intense. But something caught at my heart — my shame for my father's actions, perhaps. For whatever reason, in that moment of grace, that brief moment between thought and action, I understood that my stepmother's family were the first victims, and I could not blame them for wanting revenge. So instead of taking revenge myself, and continuing the deadly cycle, I took a solemn vow, known only to myself. I swore that I would be the guardian of my country, and that in all my days we would never again do such evil as my father had perpetrated.

Cara pondered this for a time, thinking of her own strange family and the ties of blood that connected her not only to the unicorns, but through many generations to the tormented Beloved, who was never at peace from the pain in her heart. Keeping these things in her own heart, she finally said simply, "How is it that you are now here in Luster?"

Graumag's sigh this time was so heavy it caused a flow of heat to rush past Cara. "You do know that the dragons eventually had to leave Earth?"

"Yes, I have heard as much from Firethroat and Ebillan. They also told me there is a different world, not Luster, where most of the dragons now live. Ebillan explained that he had waited too long, because he did not want

to leave Earth, and so ended up missing his chance to go there. Is that what happened to you?”

“Och, if only it were that simple. No, my story is different, lass. As the centuries wore on, the tale of how I had become a dragon was twisted and changed in the retelling. People no longer understood why I stayed coiled there on the Spindlestone, and more than one hero came to challenge me.” After a long pause, she said, “I did not want to kill them, you know. It was just that they insisted. By then Arlesboro was not really my country anymore, for the small kingdoms had been merging into one, larger, realm. My mission was ending. At the same time the world was becoming hostile to magic. So when I received word that a pair of magicians named Aaron and Bellenmore were preparing a way for dragons to escape from Earth and go to a world where we would be safe, I was relieved. Truly, I did not want to have to kill another hero.”

Cara recognized the name Bellenmore; he was the same magician Alma Leonetti had visited when she was trying to find her way into Luster.

“Of the exodus of the dragons from Earth there could be written a great book, for it was a long, dangerous, and complicated adventure. The world to which we traveled was indeed a fine place for dragons. At least, for most dragons . . .”

“But not for you,” said Cara slowly, beginning to understand.

A silence followed, broken at last by a particularly ferocious clap of thunder that caused the Squijum to jump onto Cara’s shoulder and clutch at her hair.

“Not for me,” said Graumag at last.

“Why not?”

“Bellenmore believed it was because I was not dragon born, but rather a creature formed by magical intervention. The world he and Aaron had opened was, indeed, perfect for dragons . . . too perfect in my case. We don’t know for sure what it was — something about the air, something about the water, maybe simply the world itself rejecting me. Whatever the reason, I did not thrive, and soon grew deathly ill. As I lay near to dying, a dragon named Heartflame found a way to get word to Bellenmore, who sent Aaron to fetch me back to Earth. It was a dangerous journey, and I owe my life to that young man’s courage and daring.

“Once I had recovered my health, Bellenmore convinced me I should try making a home in Luster instead. With the Queen’s approval, I came through one of the gates. It did not take me long to fall in love with this world, with its great forests and soaring mountains and — please do not be offended — its lack of people. Not only that, it was as if the world loved me back, for my health quickly returned, and I felt, if anything, stronger than ever. So I have plenty of reason to be willing to help the unicorns, Cara. Without their hospitality I would have perished long ago. I owe them, and this world, my life. So I will do as your Queen has asked.”

8

Fallon On His Own

Luster: the Wilderness

Fallon loped easily through the darkness. Much as he missed Ian and Rajiv, it was a relief to no longer be constrained by hiding the full extent of his strength and abilities. Trying to explain why he could move through the forest as swiftly and silently as a cat, despite the near pitch-blackness, would have revealed too much. And it would have been well past too much to try explaining why he had been able to run for several hours now without taking a rest.

He was enjoying the world around him. Though this place should not exist, and though the fact of its existence had cost him dearly, it was clearly a masterwork. Yet seething beneath the pleasure he felt in this world was an uneasy confusion. Though he could sense that the one he had sought for so long was indeed here in Luster, the connection he should have felt was oddly muffled, like clear water that had become unexpectedly muddy. Could Elihu, his *alahim* — the friend who was more than a friend, more than a brother — have changed that much?

Fallon paused, closed his eyes, once more let his senses reach out. There! Though the feeling of connection was still strangely indistinct, he had found

the direction at last. Relieved and delighted, he veered slightly to the right and picked up his pace.

As he did, another tremor shook the ground beneath his feet.

He sighed, wondering how much time this world had left, and hoping he could find Elihu before it was too late. He would have prayed for that to happen, but given the transgressions he and Elihu had already committed, mercy from the Higher Powers was an unlikely thing to hope for.

DAY THREE OF THE INVASION

All warfare is based on deception.

–Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

9

Arianna Departs

Luster: The Valley of the Centaurs

Princess Arianna stood halfway up a low mountain. Ahead of her was a little-used path that led to the top of the southwestern rim of the Valley of the Centaurs. She placed a tentative hoof on the path, then turned to look back. In the dim, pearly light that precedes sunrise, the valley below was painted in shades of gray. She gazed at it lovingly, trying to make herself believe she was studying the land and not looking for Arkon. As her eye traced the outline of the familiar hills something twisted in her heart. She had been happy here and knew that leaving would pierce her to the soul.

The air was still; no breath of wind stirred the thick, chestnut hair that flowed nearly to the place where her human form merged with the horse portion of her body. That stillness seemed right. In this hour before dawn, all the world should have been quiet and unmoving. Alas, it was not; though there was no wind, the very ground beneath her hooves was troubled, and the occasional tremors that shivered through the stone made Arianna shiver as well.

She turned to look at the path ahead. She would have to start soon if she wanted to pass over the valley's rim before the sun rose. Oh, where was

Arkon? Was he really not going to come?

Tears trembling in her eyes, she thought, *Do love and duty always have to be in conflict?* Her love for her grandfather had kept her from doing what should have been her duty, relieving him of the unbearable burden of his life. And, in the end, she had lost him, anyway, when Cara had done what she could not.

"Arkon?" she called softly, hoping, *longing* for an answer.

No sound at all, save for the first song of an early-waking bird.

Love and duty. Was it truly duty that kept Arkon from joining her, his sense of duty to the centaurs, a genuine belief that he was indeed the best to lead them now that the old Chiron was gone? Or was it mere ambition? A different kind of love, she guessed bitterly . . . a love of power.

And what of her? Why could *she* not surrender to love and stay with Arkon? Was it really only her sense of duty that was calling her to abandon the safety of their home? Or was she, too, following another wish, a long-held desire to see the world that lay beyond their valley?

Oh, why did Arkon not join her?

The blazing rim of the sun poked above the tops of the mountains that formed the valley's eastern wall.

Arianna sighed. He was not coming. Brushing aside the tear that trickled down her cheek, the centaur princess turned and trotted up the trail.

An hour later she had passed through a gap in the low mountains and stood on the downward slope.

As she started forward, the world again trembled beneath her. But that disruption felt as nothing compared to the trembling of her own divided heart.

10

Hunted

Luster: Dark Mountain

Morning on Dark Mountain took forever to arrive. When it finally did begin to brighten the eastern sky — a brightness that stretched forward from beneath a shadow, for heavy clouds still blanketed the mountain itself — Cara, the Squijum, and Graumag stood at the mouth of the dragon's cave.

Thunder continued to rumble in the distance.

"Do dragons always live in such high and desolate places?" Cara asked, gazing at the enormous void yawning before her.

"We learned to inhabit them back on Earth, as humans drove us ever more deeply into seclusion. By the time we seven dragons reached Luster, each by our own odd path, we were so used to such terrain that it seemed natural to seek it for our homes here as well. Besides, we did not want to intrude on the unicorns. After all, we are — to some extent — their guests in this world." Graumag crouched and lowered her head. "Now, lass, climb up. It's time we returned to your friend, the gryphon. I believe you will find the best spot for riding is at the base of my neck, just above my wings."

Thankful that she could ride this time, rather than be carried in the dragon's claws, Cara took her place. She realized that even as she was

clinging to the dragon’s neck, the Squijum was clinging to hers.

“Now I am going to let you do something very rare.”

“What?” asked Cara, feeling slightly nervous.

“Reach under my neck. Feel those thick tendrils?”

“Yes.”

“All right, take one in each hand. You can use them to hold on.”

“Won’t I hurt you?”

Graumag chuckled. “I’m fairly tough. Besides, if you hurt me too much, I’ll just eat you.”

“Maybe I should just hold your neck!”

Graumag sighed. “It was a joke, lass.”

“Oh. Sorry. I haven’t had much experience with dragon humor.”

“Not many people have,” said Graumag dryly. “Now get yourself settled in.”

Cara reached under the dragon’s neck and took one of the strands in each hand. Except for the fact that they were hot to the touch, they felt so much like snakes that she almost expected them to writhe in her hands.

“Ready?” asked Graumag.

“Ready!” replied Cara, tightening the grip of her legs against the dragon’s neck.

With no more warning than that, Graumag leaped into the air.

“Yike!” cried the Squijum, tightening his grip on Cara’s neck.

She had to repress a scream of her own as they hurtled into the yawning abyss. After a moment, Graumag snapped out her great wings, almost like a ship unfurling its sails. The leathery appendages caught and cupped the air, slowing Graumag's descent. At the same time the crest on her neck rose to

its full height. Flexing it like a rudder, the dragon tipped slightly to the left, swinging in a graceful circle.

Cara looked down in wonder. The mountain below was carved and rutted with cliffs and gorges, and marked by shadows that looked like the openings to caves. She had a sudden sense that it contained many secret places. *How many secrets,* she wondered, *are there in Luster?*

Occasional bolts of lightning still seared down from the darkened sky. Cara watched them nervously. Despite the fact that Graumag had assured her the lightning was not a danger, the girl could not help thinking, *I hope she's right that it really is magic that keeps the lightning away and not simply centuries of good luck that might run out at any moment.*

They had almost reached the spot where they had left Medafil, and Graumag was gliding down for a landing, when an arrow whizzed past Cara's ear.

"You fool!" cried a nearby voice. "Put down your bow! That's not the way to get her!"

Twisting her neck, Graumag banked so sharply that Cara nearly fell off. With a cry, she leaned forward. At the same time she tightened her legs, gripping the dragon's sinuous neck so tightly she could feel the shift and play of Graumag's muscles beneath her thighs.

"Bad men!" cried the Squijum. "Bad men! Bad men! Fly, dragon. Fly!"

Graumag did fly, her great wings beating the air as she pivoted, then hurtled back in the direction from which they had come.

They landed a fair distance up the mountain.

“Well, lass,” the dragon said softly, “it appears you have some enemies.”

“Hunters,” replied Cara. “They have to be.”

“Certainly. But why are they hunting for *you?*”

“Are you sure they aren’t just here looking for unicorns?” Cara replied nervously.

“If they are, their hunting skills are not as good as you have led me to believe, since there are no unicorns on Dark Mountain. Besides, you heard that shout, ‘That’s not the way to get her!’ I suppose they could have been referring to me, or that Squijum thing of yours, but I highly doubt it. So, again: Why are they hunting for you? I thought it was only unicorns they were after.”

“I don’t know. Beloved wanted me before, but that was to get my amulet so she could open a gate into Luster. She’s here now, so I don’t know why she would still be after me.”

“Perhaps she simply wants to get to know her descendant a little better,” said Graumag darkly.

Cara flinched at the thought, then gasped as she remembered who they had been planning to join. “What about Medafil?”

“If he was alert, he will have managed to fly away before they could take him. I hope so. I suppose it depends on how skilled these Hunters really are.”

“You don’t think they would hurt him, do you?” asked Cara, her heart squeezed by fear for her friend.

The dragon tipped her enormous head, as if thinking. Finally she said, “It’s hard to tell. Their stated task is to hunt and kill unicorns, so I guess it depends on whether Beloved has decided she wants to destroy *all* magical

beasts while she's at it. And, I suppose, how deep is their taste for blood." The dragon looked at Cara intently. "How quiet can you be? We need to do some spying. I would go myself, but I'm too big for such a task."

"Squijum go!" cried the Squijum, leaping down from Cara's neck. "Squijum good quiet sneak! Squijum look. Squijum listen. No one see brave Squijum!"

Before either Cara or Graumag could respond, the little creature scampered into the underbrush.

"Can that wee bouncy beastie really be quiet?" asked Graumag.

"I think so. He hunts bugs and other little things, so he must be quiet enough to sneak up on them. And he managed to trail me into Delvharken without being caught."

"All right, we'll give him a chance."

Despite her assurances that the Squijum could spy in silence, Cara worried. Her concern grew to near panic as the minutes, and then the hours, dragged by. After a while, mostly to distract herself, she said to Graumag, "How is it that you know the Hunters' stated task?"

"Back in Arlesboro I was friends with one of those unicorns you call 'Guardians of Memory.' In fact, I twice managed to save him from Hunters."

This comforted Cara somehow, and she settled back into her waiting. But she soon became fretful again. She was about to suggest she should go look for the Squijum when he bounded out of the gloom crying, "Squijum lookded! *Squijum finded!* Hotcha good Squijum!"

"Squijum, what did you see?"

"Many men."

“How many?”

“One, two, many! Many manies!”

Cara sighed. She had tried several times to teach the Squijum to count, but two was as high as he could get. Anything after that was “many” — which meant there could be three men on the slopes below or three hundred.

“What about Medafil?” asked Graumag.

“Beakface wingcat all tied up!”

“Oh, no!” cried Cara. “Graumag, we have to do something!”

“Squijum didded do something! Good Squijum, quiet Squijum, sneakied into camp. Good Squijum, quiet Squijum bited bad ropes. *Bite bite bite bite bite!* Bite right through!” Hugging his tail in delight he crooned, “Hotcha good Squijum!”

“You *are* good, Squijum!” said Cara.

“*Hotcha* good!” corrected the Squijum smugly.

“Hotcha good,” agreed Cara. “What did Medafil do after you freed him?”

“Beakface wingcat wait till stinky men not looking. Then he fly away!”

“If Medafil has any sense, he’ll fly *far* away,” said Graumag. “Which is what we should do now, too. Climb on my neck, Cara. We’ll detour around them and head straight for Autumngrove.”

“Shouldn’t we look for Medafil?”

“Right now it’s more important to get you out of here. Besides, if he’s thinking clearly, he’ll head for Autumngrove himself.”

“He won’t. He’ll search for me.”

Graumag sighed. “All right, we’ll see if we can spot him as we travel. If he’s not hiding I should be able to see him once we’re in the air. But he is *not* my first concern right now.”

As Graumag began to lower her head a deep voice from the gloom said, “There’s something you should know before you go.”

11

Sweetwater

Luster: The Queen's Forest

Jacques the Tumbler was thinking how very odd it was that in all his years in Luster, this was the first time he had actually ridden a unicorn. He had hesitated about doing so . . . it felt almost sacriligious to him. But there was no way he could fulfill the mission the Queen had asked him to undertake if he had to go on foot.

I'm grateful it's Cloudmane, he thought, absentmindedly patting the neck of the unicorn that carried him. He had admired the gentle unicorn ever since he had learned that she was the first mare to serve as a Guardian of Memory, one of the most dangerous tasks a unicorn could take on. He remained amazed that she could be so seemingly gentle, and yet have the strength and fierceness of heart to have accepted that dangerous mission.

Agreeing to the Queen's request to start out on this journey had required the two of them, Cloudmane and himself, to make the literally heart-piercing connection that would allow them to speak mind-to-mind.

And, of course, they could not have attempted it at all had he not traveled with the Queen's Players, the peripatetic performers who provided entertainment for unicorns and humans alike, for so long that he knew

exactly where they would be at this time. Without knowing that, trying to find the wandering group in all of Luster would have been worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack — it would have been more like trying to find a constantly moving needle in a haystack.

Not for the first time, Jacques thought about the vast differences between life on Earth and life in Luster. Though he had left Earth long ago, he knew from talking with his maybe-granddaughter Cara how easy it now was to communicate across vast distances there. Here in Luster, without a connection via one of the Queen's Pools, or a dragon willing to carry a message via flight (and he was still astonished at the idea that Graumag might be willing to do such a thing), the only way to get a message to someone like Armando de la Quintano, the head of the Players, was to make the physical journey, no matter how far, on foot. Or, as in this case, on unicorn back, something he had never expected to do.

Still, the urgency was clear, and he was the only one who knew where to find the Players at this time. It was a matter of good fortune that his old friends were close enough for him to reach . . . and that their current location was close enough to the Axis Mundi for them to travel from there to the great tree in time for what the Queen had in mind.

Dusk had fallen when Cloudmane and Jacques finally came to the little village of Sweetwater, a collection of perhaps two dozen stone huts of various sizes. On the far side of the village Jacques could see the wagons of the players. He was eager to connect to his old comrades, but courtesy

demanded he first announce himself to the village. Happily, he knew the place well, as Sweetwater had been an annual stop for the troupe.

The announcing didn't take long. He and Cloudmane were passing the first hut when a familiar voice called, "Jacques! Jacques, is it really you?"

It was Hiram Lewis, who though he had no official title, functioned as the village headman. Stepping out of the hut, the man — gray-bearded but sturdy — said, "I'm delighted to see you! But Armando told us that you had left the Players!"

"As indeed I had," said Jacques as he slid from Cloudmane's back. He reached out to shake Hiram's hand.

"Then what brings you here now? Has it to do with this awful shaking that has started to plague us?"

As if summoned by Hiram's question, a small tremor shook the ground beneath them, causing both men to stumble and nearly fall, and Cloudmane to rear in alarm.

"Indeed it does," Jacques replied, when the ground had settled.

"Do you know what's causing it?"

Jacques nodded grimly. "We are certain that the reason for the tremors is that Beloved has opened a path between Earth and Luster. The Queen has commissioned me to come here to Sweetwater to ask the Players to join the unicorns as they take one last stand against the Hunters. Whether that will stop the tremors we do not know. But the Queen has vowed to fight to the last moment in a great battle at the Axis Mundi."

"I am glad of that," said Hiram. "The unicorns may prefer not to deal with we humans any more than necessary, but they have always been kind

to us. We will gladly help in this battle if we can." He paused, then said, "Shall I summon the other villages?"

Jacque shook his head. "No time for that, I fear. The battle is but days away, and . . . "

"And the other villages are all far too far from here to reach the great tree in time. I understand."

"Your help will be most welcome," said Jacques. "But the main reason I came is to summon the Players to join us."

"Which we will gladly do!" cried a voice from behind Hiram.

Jacques' face broke into one of his rare smiles. "Armando! It is good to see you, old friend!"

"I should hope so!" cried Armando, turning three somersaults then landing on his feet in front of Jacques. Given how short and round Armando was, it was always an astonishment to see him do that. "It is not that long since you left us, but you have been much missed. It's hard to say which the Players complain about most — that they miss your ever-gloomy voice, or your hilarious stories. You did leave a gaping hole in our merry band when you left us, dear friend."

Jacques sighed. "You know well that when I realized that Cara might be my granddaughter, my heart could make no other choice than to travel with her."

"I understand. But where is she now?"

"Oh, off seeking a dragon somewhere," Jacques replied, with deceptive casualness. He could not bring himself to admit how terrified he was on his maybe-granddaughter's behalf.

Armando's eyes grew even wider at this news. "It seems we have a lot of catching up to do," he said.

"And not much time to do it," replied Jacques. "It is the Queen's belief that all of Luster is in danger."

"That is my belief as well," said Armando. "But I should tell you that someone else has joined us here at Sweetwater. And I think he is also on a mission from the Queen.

"Thomas? Is Thomas here?" cried Jacques.

"The Tinker has indeed joined us, though he comes with a most mysterious cargo."

Jacques' smile caused his face to crease in strange and almost frightening ways. "Then he has succeeded in his mission! That is excellent news. I have been terrified on his behalf, ever since he set out."

"Do you know what is in his wagon?" Armando asked eagerly. "He refuses to speak of it."

"If he has done as the Queen asked, then he has captured death on two feet," replied Jacques.

"Death on two feet?" repeated Armando, sounding frightened now.

"Indeed," said Jacques. "When the time comes, we must make sure that it is directed toward the enemy, and not us."

12

Elihu

Luster: Dark Mountain

At the unexpected voice, Cara gasped and reached for her sword, terrified that one of the Hunters had found them. Yet the words didn't seem like anything a Hunter would say. She looked around, but could see no one. Clutching her sword's hilt, she hissed, "Who are you? *Where* are you?"

"Right here," said a man, as he stepped from between two trees.

He was very tall, with brown skin and golden hair that almost seemed to cast its own light. Oddly, he wore nothing save an animal skin that had been fashioned into a kind of tunic. Cara felt her heart lurch; even in the deep shade of Dark Mountain's heavy clouds it was clear he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

"Who are you?" she asked again.

"My name is Elihu."

Cara blinked, remembering that a man named Elihu had been present at the Purification Ceremony that led to the birth of the Whisperer.

It couldn't be the same man, she told herself. *Even people who have extra-long lives because they've drunk from the Queen's Pool grow older as time goes on. Just look at Thomas and Alma Leonetti!*

“Where did you come from?” asked Graumag, a dangerous edge in her voice.

“That is not important,” replied the man. “At least, not right now. What matters now is that there are some things you must know.”

“And what would they be, exactly?”

Elihu took a step closer. Graumag stirred and hissed, and her spiny crest rose to nearly its full height, clearly warning the man not to try anything. Taking the dragon’s message, Elihu stopped. Looking at Cara, he said, “You wear one of the Queen’s amulets, do you not?”

Cara reached toward her neck. As soon as she realized what she was doing she cursed herself for giving up the information so easily. “How did you know that?” she asked.

A sad smile curved the man’s lips. “Because I made them.”

“But they’re hundreds of years old!”

He shrugged. “What’s to say that I am not?”

Cara wondered if this might be the same Elihu after all. Before she could ask, the man said, “I know you have it, because the amulets call out to their maker.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cara, puzzled by this response.

Elihu tipped his head in an odd way and said, almost shyly, “All things call out to the one who made them.”

“Do you really want to take credit for the Queen’s amulets?” asked Graumag, her voice threateningly soft. “That’s a powerful claim.”

The man sighed. Turning to Cara, he said, “Take out the amulet, please.” When Cara hesitated, he said, a bit gruffly, “It’s not as if I don’t know that you have one.”

Blushing a little, she pulled the amulet from her shirt. Closing his eyes, Elihu lifted his right hand so that his large palm was facing her. At once the amulet began to glow. A moment later it floated up from Cara's own hand to hover in the air about three inches above it.

"That proves nothing," said Graumag sharply. "I have known more than one wizard who could lift something from a distance. Let's stop the blather and get to the point. I want to get the girl off the mountain *before* those men below us figure out where she is. Unless," she added dangerously, "you're trying give them time to get up here."

The tall man shook his head. "Those people are no friends of mine," he said bitterly.

"You said there was something I should know," prodded Cara.

"Those men are hunting you —"

"I know *that* already!" The words sounded ruder than Cara had intended, but she was still not comfortable with the big man, not sure of how to react to him.

"And how many of them do you think there are?"

Cara shrugged. "Three or four, I would guess."

Elihu shook his head. "By my count there are two groups, of twenty each."

Cara gasped. "They can't be here just to catch me. How would they have known where to find me?"

"Beloved has given them something she called 'tracking packets.' I don't know how they work, but it is clear from what I heard the men say that they were created specifically to help them find you."

"Look at me, human," said Graumag, her voice low and intense.

Elihu complied, gazing directly into the dragon's golden eyes.

After a moment the dragon nodded and said, "He speaks the truth, Cara."

"You have an excellent protector," said Elihu, gesturing toward Graumag. "But even she is vulnerable, are you not, good lady?"

The dragon sighed and said, "The right arrow in the right place, a well-aimed spear, yes, one of these things could end my life."

Cara felt new alarm course through her. "You said there was something I should know," she repeated to Elihu.

His muscles rippled as he pushed back a strand of golden hair that had fallen over his high, brown forehead. "The amulet can —"

He broke off and pressed a finger to his lips. Cara held her breath.

"Don't make a sound!" hissed Elihu. "Dragon, hold them off!"

Lunging forward, he snatched Cara into his arms, then bolted into the gloom.

13

Cousin Conference

Luster: A Cave

The delver who Cara had nicknamed "Rocky" had moved deeply into the Stone, so deeply that his cousins, Razka and Gratza, who had responded to Rocky's powerful "cousin call" and joined him in this cave, stared at him in dismay. Was it possible to bring him back from the Stonespell he was lost in?

And even if it was possible, should they do it? After all, he had been condemned as a traitor by King Gnurflax, and stripped of his name as a result.

On the other hand, he was their cousin . . .

Each cousin that entered the cave after Razka and Gratz first settled into their designated places took one look at the situation — with their huge eyes they could see it all, despite the darkness — then sought the stone to which his name had been attached. Some moved quickly, boldly. Others trembled with fear. Yet each, finally, claimed his stone, held it close, and took his place, sitting cross-legged with hands folded over his chest.

It was many hours before Gergga, the seventh to respond, came into the cave. “Broken boulders!” he muttered, when he saw what was going on.

But he found his stone and joined the others, who sat in a half circle facing the one who had summoned them.

The seven delvers remained this way for many hours, silently calling to their cousin with all the power of their connection. They were not trying to pull him from some great physical distance, as he had done to them. Rather, they were trying to draw him back from the edge of the oblivion to which his spirit had wandered as he let himself sink back into the Stone from which he had come. The effort was so fierce that several of the delvers had grains of sand popping out on their foreheads, much as beads of sweat would have formed on the brow of a human.

At last they heard a cracking sound. Opening their eyes, they saw their cousin begin to straighten his back. Slowly — very slowly — the traces of stone began to fade from his flesh. The fissures that had opened in his skin began to seal themselves shut. Yet they all knew that the dark lines where those cracks had been would remain with their cousin for so long as he lived, a set of tattoos that would mark him as one who had gone deep into the Stone. Were he not an exile and a traitor, those lines would earn him great respect.

Suddenly his teeth began to chatter. Moments later he was trembling violently.

“He’s got Stonechill!” cried Gratz. “Quick, we have to warm him!”

Three of the delvers leaped to their feet and caught their cousin up in their arms, pressing against him and holding him tight.

Slowly — painfully slowly — the shivering diminished. At last he drew a deep breath, opened his eyes, and whispered, “Thank you, my cousins, for answering my call. Thank you for pulling me back from the Stone.”

It fell to Zagrat, oldest of the seven who had responded, and therefore now the cove's leader, to reply. "Nedzik, do you realize what you have done?"

He flinched. "Do not call me that! It is no longer my name."

"Well, it is the name *we* had to use to call you back from the Stone!" flared Zagrat. "Do you not understand that in doing so we have cast ourselves out from Delvharken? Do you not understand what we have sacrificed to redeem you? Do you not understand that in order to save your miserable life, we have had to make ourselves exiles, too?"

"When the King is mad, it is an honor to be an exile," Rocky replied, causing the others to gasp.

Zagrat was so infuriated he could not speak and seemed on the verge of exploding instead.

Razka, who was sitting to Zagrat's left, put a hand on his arm and murmured, "Let me." Turning to their troublesome cousin, he said, "For what reason have you called us together, after the King ordered us sundered? Why do you once again put us, your cousins, whom you should protect, at risk?"

Rocky did not answer at first. Instead he extended his arms, then flexed his fingers, looking surprised that they still worked. Finally he said, "I believe the King is wrong in helping the Hunters."

"We already know what you believe," snapped Zagrat. "It was listening to you yammer on about that idea that started all the trouble for us to begin with. Besides, it does not make any difference. The help the Hunters sought has already been given."

Rocky stared at Zagrat in horror. "What do you mean?"

“Someone provided a way for the human female called Beloved to open a gate from Earth to this world. She has entered with her army of Hunters.”

Rocky shuddered. “This news is worse than I had expected.”

Zagrat sighed in exasperation. “Why should this news trouble us? The Hunters are after the unicorns, who are our enemies. They will not bother delvers.”

“Pray to the Great One that you are right, cousin. But my worry is not so much that the Hunters will bother us. It is what their entry will do to our world.”

“You still have not answered the main question,” insisted Zagrat. “*Why* did you call us here?”

“Because I have learned something new, something so important that I felt you, my beloved cousins, must hear it, too.”

“How important can it be? Do you realize how you have endangered us for this?”

“Do you realize how the King has endangered Luster?”

Against protocol during a cousin-conference, there was a murmur among the other six delvers. It was Razka who finally said, a bit of awe in his voice, “After what you have already suffered, you still dare question the King?”

“Gnurflax’s ability to make me suffer does not prove him right,” snapped the rebel cousin. “It merely proves him . . .” He hesitated over the word, but decided no other would fit. “It merely proves him a tyrant.” He paused, then swallowing his anger said more calmly, “Do you think the King was right to sunder our cove, Razka?”

Razka hesitated. He did not at all believe the King had been right in that action. But to admit that was to admit that the King was fallible, something he could not bring himself to say aloud. He was still wrestling with his response when Gratz shouted, “Of course the King was not right! Cousins belong together!”

His words generated a mutter of agreement from the other delvers. Finally even Zagrat nodded in assent.

The rebel seized the moment. “If Gnurflax was wrong in that, he can be wrong in other things as well.”

Zagrat scowled. “Be careful how you speak!”

“It is too late for caution! I have already been accused of treason, and punished for it, and survived.” He paused, then said softly, “Cousins, I do not wish to bring you into danger. If any of you wish to go, I release you from the Call. But if so, go now, at once, for I have important things to say, and if you cannot join me you may prefer never to have heard them.”

A long silence followed. The cousins glanced at one another and shifted uneasily. But none of them, not even Zagrat, rose to leave.

The rebel nodded. “All right. Now I will tell you what happened after the King had me thrown into that cell.”

The reunited cove listened in rapt attention as their cousin regaled them with his story of meeting Cara when they were imprisoned in the same cell in the King's dungeons. They were near breathless when he told how the two of them — with the help of a strange creature called “the Squijum” — escaped from the dungeon and, accompanied by a dwarf and a gryphon, traveled to the Valley of the Centaurs. Their fascination changed to startled indignation when he recounted the tale of the Whisperer, a malevolent force

born from an ill-advised attempt of the unicorns to purge themselves of all darkness. But it was not until he claimed that this strange entity had seduced a tribe of dwarves and from them created the delvers that they erupted in anger.

Above their cries of denial, the rebel shouted, “And thus it is that we are locked in this endless struggle with the unicorns! Our roots are tangled in their own darkness.”

“Now, at last, you truly go too far!” roared Zagrat. “Delvers have *nothing* to do with unicorns. We were in Delvharken first. Everyone knows that.”

“Were we?” asked their cousin. “Are you sure?”

“That’s what ‘The Story’ tells us,” said Wurtza, sounding a little confused.

The others muttered their agreement. They had all been raised on “The Story.” It was the first tale a delver learned, sung in simple form to the youngest delvlings as soon as they were able to listen, then repeated endlessly, with ever more detail, as they grew older, until it was embedded in their heads and hearts as absolute truth. “The Story” told that the delvers, the one true people of the Stone, had been pulled from the harsh and hurtful light by the Great One and given all the deeps of Delvharken to be their own forever and ever. In this world, which was made from a fallen star, they lived in peace — until the unicorns invaded and spread themselves across the land above them, calling it “Luster” and acting as if they owned it.

“All right, then who is the Great One?” asked the rebel. “Where did he come from? Does he really exist? If so, why has he been silent all these years?”

“Those are deep mysteries and not meant for the likes of us,” said Zagrat gruffly.

“Well, there are other mysteries unraveling as we speak, mysteries that may indeed be meant for us. You know as well as I that King Gnurflax has changed in recent years. Why? What happened to him? The delver-guard gossip that they have seen him listening in secret to someone, then speaking as if to the air. Is the King mad? If not, who is he talking to? The Great One? If so, why does he not share the prophecies? And if not the Great One, then who? Who? And who knows what mischief might be brewing from these secret conversations?”

The cousins stirred uneasily.

“Do you not feel the changes in the Stone around us?” pleaded the rebel. “Something is happening, and I do not think it good. Oh, my cousins, I did not wish to challenge the King! I did not wish to break from delver law. But what is this uneasiness I feel in the secret stone of my heart?”

Zagrat snorted. “Madness, most likely — not the King’s, but yours.”

He shrugged. “That may be. Yet you agreed with me, Zagrat, that it was also madness when Gnurflax let the human, Ian Hunter, into our caves.”

“There have always been humans prowling around on the surface,” said Gergga.

“But they always arrived here by ones and twos. Now a flood of them has poured through! And though the unicorns have always been our enemies, we have never been involved in killing them, as these Hunters wish to do. You were uneasy about it, but you all joined me when I first spoke to the unicorn prince in the forest. You joined me because you knew something

strange, something frightening was happening. Well, now it has gotten worse."

As if to punctuate his words, the ground beneath them shuddered and rolled.

The cove of delvers shuddered, too. This was not how the world was supposed to act.

"What do you propose to do, genius?" asked Zagrat, when the temblor had passed.

"I want to discover if the unicorn prince, Lightfoot, still lives. He is the only one who will listen to me." The rebel paused, took a breath, then said something that made his cousins gasp. "I want to see if, together, we can find a way to heal this wound."

"You *are* mad!" cried Zagrat, as if this were the final proof.

"How can you hope to find one unicorn in all of this annoyingly bright upper world?" asked Rendzi, somewhat more helpfully.

"We did it before!"

"Yes, but you had your teacher's help that time," said Gratz.

Every delver had a teacher, assigned to them in a secret ceremony at the end of their eighth year — a ceremony that marked their transition from delvling to full-fledged delver. The teacher remained secret, always, and there were terrible stories of what happened when a delver did reveal the name of his or her teacher. For the rebel cousin, this secret had been more joyful, and a greater burden, than for most delvers, because his teacher was someone of great power. Now he pondered for some time before replying, "I had not thought of that. You are correct, Gratz. Therefore, I must seek my teacher."

Zagrat rolled his eyes. “Your know very well your teacher will not talk to you. You have no name! You do not even exist as far as he is concerned.”

“I have a nickname!”

“A *what?*” asked Zagrat, sounding truly puzzled.

“It is a name given by a friend, to be used in place of your true name. I am now called ‘Rocky.’ ”

“You grow more demented by the moment!”

“Maybe so. On the other hand, while I have a nickname, you — having used my real name to call me back — have no name at all! So I think you need a nickname as well.”

It was all the others could do to keep Zagrat from leaping onto their cousin and throttling him.

14

Separation Anxiety

Luster: the Wilderness

Rajiv watched in silence as Ian Hunter, who was cursing softly to himself, stared at the ground. The sahib had lost the trail of the delvers who had taken M'Gama, and Rajiv could see that he was struggling to contain his frustration.

The boy longed to help, but knew the sahib did not like interference. Besides, it was clear he really was very good at this tracking business.

Rajiv looked to the sahib's wife, Martha. The memsahib's face was creased with worry. Next to her stood Lightfoot. Rajiv wished mightily that the unicorn had seen fit to pierce *his* chest, so he could also talk with the Prince mind-to-mind.

He settled to his haunches to wait. He had done a great deal of waiting during his years as a street boy in Delhi and was quite good at it by this time.

The problem for Sahib Hunter was simple. They had come to a swath of smooth rock that was a good ten yards wide and did not take a footprint. If the creatures they were trying to track had gone straight across, he should have been able to pick up their trail on the far side. But he had been unable

to find any sign of them directly opposite the place they had stepped onto the rock. Rajiv knew, without being told, that this indicated they had turned to walk along the stone. Unfortunately, the broad ribbon of rock stretched both right and left for as far as the eye could see. The delvers could have followed it for a long way in either direction without leaving a sign before finally entering the forest again. Rajiv put his hand to the wonderful sword that the sahibs had given him back in the castle. He was looking forward to meeting one of these delvers.

The sahib came back to them. “This may take a while,” he said.

The memsahib closed her eyes, but said nothing. Rajiv sensed she was trying not to interfere, but he also knew the sahib was constantly aware of the way she watched him. The boy wished he could give the woman some of his patience. It would help Sahib Hunter if she could be calmer.

Rajiv was very fond of Sahib Hunter. True, he, Rajiv, had nearly died as a result of their adventure in the Rainbow Prison. Still, he found this new life an interesting change from begging for a living.

He watched as the sahib paced the edge of the stone, going some fifty yards to the right, then crossing over and returning along the opposite side. He walked past them and went the same distance in the other direction, again coming back on the opposite side. When he stood in front of them once more he looked grim. “We have to split up,” he said.

Rajiv could not help himself. “Sahib!” he cried in alarm.

The man raised his hands in a gesture for silence. “Just until we can find the trail again, Rajiv. Or until nightfall, if it comes to that.” Pointing to his right, he said, “I am going to head that way. I want you three to go in the

other direction. Walk as close to the edge of the stone as you can and scan the ground on both sides for the kind of footprint we've been following."

"Why are you going alone?" asked the memsahib. "Why don't we go two and two?"

"For two reasons. First, if your group finds something, I want Lightfoot to come at a gallop to get me. That will cost us the least time. If we were traveling in pairs, that would leave whoever had been with Lightfoot alone, which I would rather not do."

"If I went with the Prince, I could just ride him back," said Rajiv.

Despite their situation, the trace of a smile curved the sahib's lips. "I am sure that is something you have been dying to do, you scamp. But as I said, I have two reasons for wanting to work this way. The second is that tracking like this is what I'm trained for, what I've spent years studying and practicing. None of you have had that training, and it's possible any one of you might miss an important sign. With three of you working, there's a better chance of your spotting the trail if it does lie in that direction."

"And what if *you* find the trail?" asked the memsahib. "Will you come back for us?"

For a moment, no one spoke. Rajiv watched Sahib Hunter's lean face carefully. Finally the man said, "If I find something in the next hour or so I will come and get you. You'll be moving slowly, so I should be able to catch up to you with no problem." He paused, then said reluctantly, "If more time than that has passed, I think I should just keep moving."

Rajiv could hold his peace no longer. "Sahib! How will we then reconnect?"

“If you have not found something by tomorrow night come back to this spot and wait for me. If I am not back within a day after that you should return to the Axis Mundi and be ready to pass through it should this world become too unstable. I will try to meet you there.”

“But, sahib —”

The memsahib interrupted him. “Ian is right, Rajiv. If we find the trail we will have to fetch him, as he is the only one who can speak with the delvers. But if he finds the trail, he must go on as quickly as possible. Getting Cara is the most important thing right now.”

She paused, and Rajiv could tell she was communicating with the unicorn again. Oh, how he wished he could do the same!

“What was that about?” asked Sahib Hunter, when it was clear she had finished.

“Lightfoot says that he can speak a bit of delvish as well. So I asked if he could also go underground. He replied that, based on a story he recently heard that if the trail leads to the main entrance he could get in. But he also said he thinks it is more likely that we will come to one of their tunnel entrances, which he would not be able to pass. So I told him we would still need you.”

The memsahib put her hands on her husband’s shoulders. Looking directly into his eyes, she said, “If we find something, we will send for you at once. If you find something, just keep going. *Find our daughter!”*

The sahib placed his hands over hers. “I don’t like this, Martha, don’t like it at all. But I do think it is the wisest course.” He sighed and broke the contact. Looking at the others, he said, “We need to mark this spot firmly in our minds.”

Rajiv spread his hands. “The trees all look the same, sahib. How can we tell this spot after we spend two days looking at more and more of them?”

“Look more carefully, Rajiv. Surely if you could travel the streets of Delhi without getting lost, you can find this spot again.”

Rajiv thought about that for a second, then began to gaze around with intent focus. “Aha!” he exclaimed after a moment. “Look there — that tree is very crooked, not like the others at all. And right in front of it is a fallen tree that almost touches the stone path. And see? On the stone itself is a dark spot as big as my head. Yes, sahib, I understand. Those three things will mark the place for us.”

He began to walk away. “Rajiv! It’s not time to start!”

“I know that, sahib. But I must see this from the other side, too. As you know, it will look different coming back.”

The memsahib stared at him in surprise. Rajiv continued what he was doing, but listened carefully and was happy to hear Sahib Hunter say, “The boy is an excellent traveling companion, brave and true of heart.” He walked a little farther than he had intended, so that he could pretend he had not heard. When he returned, he said simply, “Yes, I can find this again, sahib.”

“I knew I could count on you.”

Then the sahib and the memsahib went off to talk on their own for a bit. It was not long, though they did take a moment to kiss. Rajiv rolled his eyes and turned to the Prince. Feeling daring, he reached out to place his hand on the unicorn’s neck, something he had been longing to do. The beautiful creature did not shy away, and even though they could not communicate —

he *did* hope that would happen sometime soon — the boy felt a flow of peaceful energy. It was very nice.

Then the sahib came and took him aside. “I hope to see you soon, Rajiv. Very soon. I do not need to tell you to be wise and cautious — sometimes I think you are better at that than I am. But, please . . . take care of the memsahib for me.”

The boy smiled, white teeth flashing in his dark face. “Do not worry, sahib. We went to great trouble to fetch her from that terrible red place. I do not want to lose track of her now!” Then he placed the palms of his hands together, bowed slightly, and said, “*Namaste,* Sahib Hunter.”

The sahib returned the blessing. A moment later he was gone. A moment after that, Rajiv, Lightfoot, and the memsahib were moving in the opposite direction.

Rajiv glanced back once or twice, hoping that it would be only a matter of moments before the sahib stood and hailed them, shouting that he had found the trail once more.

Or, even better, he might find it himself.

With that happy thought, he turned all his attention to the task at hand, eager to bring the time of separation from his friend the sahib to a quick and happy conclusion.

15

A Dream Within a Dream

Luster: Delvharken

Trapped within Stone, the delver wizard Namza once again began to dream, a dream that was the strangest one so far, for it was a memory of the strangest thing that ever happened to him.

As the dream began he had completed his *nakken-gar,* the year of wandering required as part of his apprenticeship to his teacher, the wizard Metzram. He had left Thomas the Tinker, the strange human who had rescued him after his near death from gathering the dragon stones from in front of Bronzeclaw's cave, and was returning to Delvharken. He was eager to reach home, yet nervous about how he would present himself to his teacher.

At least I have the stones I was ordered to gather, he thought, patting the pouch that rattled at his side. *And I am coming back alive, unlike the previous two apprentices.*

He entered the world below through a secret tunnel known only to the court wizard and his student. Trotting along the stone passageways, moving easily through the transit points, he felt happy to be back, yet aware — in a way he never had been before — of how troubled his home really was.

Why was everyone in Delvharken always so suspicious, so quick to anger?

When Namza reached Metzram’s cave he found the old wizard sitting on the floor, legs crossed, hands on his knees. The young delver entered as silently as a lizard crawls along a wall. Metzram did not open his eyes. Even so, he said, softly, “Welcome back, my student. Sit, please.”

Namza did as he was asked. For a long time there was nothing but silence in the cave. Yet Namza could tell — and it was terrifying to him — that though his teacher's eyes remained closed, he was studying him. Finally Metzram said, “I am well pleased.”

“Because I have returned with the dragon stones?”

His teacher chuckled. “Though I am glad to have them, that is not why I am pleased. My pleasure comes because I can tell that you have learned what I really sent you into the world to discover.”

“What was that?”

“That there is another way for us to be.”

Awash with relief, Namza said, “Then you are not angry that I have grown . . . softer?”

To be “soft” was considered almost a crime among delvers.

“We would all do well to be softer,” answered Metzram, a reply that shocked his student to the core.

And then he told a story, which Namza, in his stony dream, experienced as if it were happening to him, as if it were a dream within a dream. . . .

Metzram, in his youth, had been sent into the upper world to do his own *nakken-gar*. One day, as he was walking in the twilight forest, which was dark enough to be comfortable, he came upon a woman dressed in white robes, with long golden hair flowing down her back. This was all he could see of her, for she sat on a stone at the edge of a stream, gazing into the water and sighing.

Because he was curious, and because the *nakken-gar* is meant for learning, Metzram approached. He certainly did not expect to feel compassion for the woman or to comfort her in any way. But when she turned toward him, he gasped, astonished at the beauty of her lustrous brown skin and enormous eyes. The beauty was an alien thing to him and something he might normally have found repulsive. Yet it was undeniable in its power.

“Greetings, delver,” she said in a voice like the sweet sound of water flowing over stones.

Without realizing what he was doing, he fell to his knees. Without wondering why he could understand her, for she did not speak in delvish, he said, “Lady, you are sad. What troubles you?”

She smiled a wan smile. “I came to this world to look in on a friend who is lost to me.”

“Lady, what is his name?”

“I called him Elihu.”

“Lady, I would help if I could, but I know of no Elihu.”

“No, nor should you.”

“Lady, what are you?”

“That I do not wish to say. But I can tell that you are sore troubled. If you come to me, I can ease your heart, for I know of a bad thing that was done to you and your people.”

Entranced, Metzram approached her. She placed her hands upon his head and said softly, “Delver, you can choose to be different. You can choose to let go of the darkness inside. It is not easy. It is never easy. But you are not doomed to carry this forever.”

Metzram felt an odd stirring in his heart, uncomfortable and frightening, yet also sweet and exciting.

“I would assign you a task,” said the lady.

“I have a task already. I am on my *nakken-gar* and must return to my teacher with a prize.”

“If you have a year, you have time for this, too,” she said softly. “In a cavern not far from here there is a great library. It is called the Unicorn Chronicles —”

“We hate the unicorns!” spat Metzram, and was at once ashamed because it felt bad to say such a thing in front of this lady, who was like . . . who was like . . .

Words failed him, and he began to weep, which he had never, until now, done from the heart, only when he was in pain, usually from being beaten.

“I know you hate them. But you do not have to, and your spirit will be easier when you stop. Now, here is what I ask of you. Seek out this cavern, which is occupied by a dwarf called the Chronicle Keeper. Watch carefully, enter secretly. Find your way to the great library. In one of the oldest of the books you will find a story, the story of the Whisperer.” She paused, and the

look of pain that creased her face nearly made him weep. “I want you to remove those pages.”

“Shall I destroy them, lady?”

She shuddered. “No! I am not a destroyer, nor should you be. To destroy knowledge is a great sin. But for the sake of my friend, who I have loved, I would hide this story away for now.”

“You are powerful and beautiful, lady. Why not do this yourself?”

She smiled, another sad smile. “It is bad enough that I ask it of you. I am stretching ancient law even to do that, for I should not interfere.” With a sigh she added, “But love makes fools of us all, even those of us among the Great Powers.”

“Lady, you could never be a fool!”

Her laugh was also like water over stones, but now the light, tinkling sound of water flowing rapidly. “You would be amazed at how foolishness pervades the world, young Metzram.”

“I did not tell you my name!”

“Nonetheless, I knew it, and I have been waiting for you. Now listen. It is indeed possible I could do this, though I might pay a very dear price. I may pay, anyway. But I have another hope, and that is that if you do this for me, you will discover something about yourself, as you are beginning to already. That may help ameliorate my crime in asking you.” She paused for a long time, then said, “Change is often hard, young delver, hard and slow. To change the great wrong done to you and your kind will take many, many years.”

“What was this great wrong?”

“It is in the pages I have asked you to recover.”

“How will I know them? I cannot read dwarvish writing.”

“You may be surprised.”

All through this conversation she had kept her hands on the sides of his head. Now she leaned closer, looked directly into his eyes, and whispered, “Go. Go and do this, Metzram.” She kissed him on the forehead. “And when you have the pages, take them to the Valley of the Centaurs and say that Allura asks the Chiron to keep them in safety. Will you do this for me?”

Unable to resist the plea in her eyes, he nodded and said, “I will.”

As the dream ended, and the images of his teacher’s strange experience faded, Namza would have shifted uneasily in his sleep. But, of course, he was held tight by the Stone, and could not move at all.

16

The Fire in the Blood

Luster: Dark Mountain

"Stop struggling!” whispered Elihu. “I got you away from there just in time.”

From the distance, Cara heard a cry of rage, followed by a deep-throated roar and the screams of men in pain.

“It sounds as if your dragon friend didn’t appreciate having those men try to take you,” said Elihu, not slowing his pace. He tightened his grip, pulling her closer to his broad chest. His body was warm in the moist, chilly air. “Now, no more talk. There were a lot of them, more than even your dragon friend could keep from following us, though she’ll doubtless do some serious damage while she’s trying. Nonetheless, it’s a certainty that some are still after us even now.”

As if to prove his words, moments later Cara heard someone crashing through the bushes behind them.

Elihu picked up his pace. Despite his bare feet, he ran swiftly and silently through the misty gloom, dodging between trees, leaping roots and stones, never slowing until the sound of pursuit finally faded. Only when he stopped to let Cara slide to the ground did he begin to pant for breath.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “But what about —”

He pressed a finger to her lips for silence.

She nodded.

Elihu took her hand. Wrapped in his enormous grip, it suddenly felt tiny to her. Moving in perfect silence, he led her farther up the mountainside. Cara herself did not attain complete silence, though she managed without making too much noise, mostly because he carefully guided her around brush and rocks. At last they came to a cave. Cara followed Elihu inside.

The darkness was even greater here. “Wait,” she pleaded. Fishing Medafil’s sphere from her pocket, she twisted it between her hands.

At the first glow of light, Elihu whispered urgently, “Turn that off! Do you want to bring them right to us?”

“But I can’t see!”

“I’ll carry you if need be, but turn it off!”

She did as he asked, and he picked her up once more. However, this time it was only a few minutes before he set her down again, saying softly, “All right, we’ve turned a few corners. It should be safe now.”

Cara twisted the sphere until it filled her hands, then cupped her fingers around it. Its glow, tinted rose by her flesh and blood, was just enough to see by. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I feel better this way.”

“Good.”

“Who are you?” she asked again.

The big man shook his head, causing his golden hair to slide across his broad, brown shoulders. “I didn’t search you out to talk about me. And we don’t have a lot of time. Now listen carefully. The men who are hunting you won’t stop for anything. Hunting is what they do, they’re obsessed by it,

and you are their quarry. But there is a way for you to escape them. It's not without danger of its own, but it should baffle them for now."

"What is it?" asked Cara, half afraid to hear the answer.

Elihu held out his hand. "May I hold the amulet?"

Cara shook her head.

Elihu sighed. "In case you've forgotten, I did just save you from those Hunters."

"Yes, but I don't know why. Maybe it was so you could steal the amulet yourself."

She felt ungrateful saying it and was painfully aware that the man could simply take the amulet from her if he wanted. But she couldn't bring herself to hand it over to him. And she clung to a memory of something she had heard from both Beloved and the delvers: If they were forced to take the amulet, rather than having Cara give it to them freely, it would somehow damage its magic. She hoped Elihu knew this, too, then wondered if perhaps the rules were different for him, assuming he really had made the amulets.

The tall man stared at her for a few moments. Finally he said, "The crafting of those five amulets took great power, and much of that power remains locked within them. You already know the amulet can move you from one world to another. I suspect you are not aware that it can also unleash that which is hidden within you."

"What is hidden within me?" asked Cara.

She suspected the answer even as she asked the question and found that simply suspecting it filled her with both fear and longing.

"*That,* I am quite sure, you do already know."

Closing her eyes, she whispered, “I’m part unicorn.”

“Follow the thought,” said Elihu gently.

Cara opened her eyes, her heart pounding with both joy and fear. “Are you telling me I can *become* a unicorn?”

A flicker of pain twisted Elihu’s beautiful features. It vanished as quickly as it had appeared, so fleeting she wasn’t certain she had actually seen it. He took a deep breath, then replied solemnly, “Yes, that’s what I am saying.”

“Will I be able to turn back?”

His face hardened. “That I cannot guarantee. Transformational magic is . . . difficult. Such changes require a great deal of energy.”

Though her mind thrilled at the thought of becoming a unicorn, Cara also felt a shudder of fear. It was only her body that would change. She would still be herself inside, right? She would still be Cara.

Or would she? Her mind turned to her grandmother, so different now that she was Amalia Flickerfoot. Had becoming a unicorn done that to her? Or had she simply returned to a truer self that had been lost during her years as a human? She remembered, too, Graumag’s tale of how endragonment had changed her not only in form, but in spirit.

How would being a unicorn make me different? she wondered. Remembering the rest of Graumag’s story, she also thought, *And how much will the transformation hurt?*

But her mind was also bubbling with eager ideas of what such a metamorphosis would mean. How often had she imagined the joy of running alongside Lightfoot with the same grace and freedom he had, of leaping nimbly over the hillsides, of feeling her silvery mane flow in the

wind? Had those thoughts been mere pleasant fantasies? Or had they come from something inside her, something that was crying out to be set free?

Cara stretched her arms in front of her and frowned. What would it be to live without hands? She recalled Finder saying that having hands was the one thing he envied about humans. The pang of loss she felt at remembering the big, gentle unicorn brought to mind the other great loss of her life. What about her parents? If . . . *When!* she corrected herself fiercely . . . *when* she found them again, what would they think of her if she had become a unicorn?

Would they still love her?

The question was frightening. Yet Elihu's offer had woken a desperate yearning inside her. She resisted, forcing her mind to a more practical question: "I don't understand. What good will it do me to become a unicorn? The Hunters are after them, too."

"True enough. But this group, which is large and fierce, is clearly after *you."*

"How do you know that?"

"I have been following them since shortly after they entered Luster and have listened in on their conversations."

"Why were you following them?"

"I didn't intend to, at first. I was actually looking for you."

"Why?" asked Cara, startled.

"Well, not you, specifically. When I sensed the amulet you carry, I grew curious and wanted to see where it was. Following my sense of the amulet brought me to the Hunters, which eventually led me to you." He paused, looked back toward the mouth of the cave. "I'm sorry, Cara —"

“How do you know my name?”

“I heard it from the Hunters, of course.”

“Of course,” she murmured, wondering whether to believe him.

“What I was going to say was that if Beloved has diverted a group of her men from the Hunt strictly to seek you out, she must want you very badly. Whatever the reason for that, it cannot be good.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I have been aware of Beloved and her Hunters for a very long time. Now listen. Here is the reason I suggest this. The men following you cannot outrun a unicorn. No man can. They can lure unicorns — lure and entrap them — but they cannot outrun them. So if you are smart enough to avoid being taken by surprise, and strong enough to ignore their enticements, you should be safe. Do not mistake me. This is not without risk. It is simply . . . a chance to keep you from the clutches of Beloved.”

“I need to think about it.”

“I understand. But every moment you spend thinking brings them closer.”

“What about you?”

He paused, and she thought she saw a look of great sorrow in his eyes. But all he said was, “They are not after me, and will not be expecting me. Once you have changed, I will create a diversion to give you more time to flee.” He spread his hands. “I don’t want to pressure you, Cara. But your pursuers will be here soon and we need to get you out of this cave, or you will be trapped. If you go as a girl, you may escape for now, but they will continue to trail you. To outrun them in your present form is impossible,

and there are too many for me to fight. But if you go as a unicorn . . . well, the whole game changes, doesn't it?"

She considered the alternatives. Both were frightening, but when she recalled her last terrifying confrontation with Beloved, one fear quickly became overwhelming. She needed only to imagine herself caught and taken before her horrible ancestress once more and the choice was made. In a voice barely above a whisper, she said, "Transform me."

"You're certain?"

Cara nodded in response.

"I need to hear you say it."

She swallowed, but the words rose freely, almost unbidden. "I want to become a unicorn."

Elihu closed his eyes. "This is the last time I will see you in this form," he whispered. "Now, take my hand."

She did as he asked.

Clasping her hand firmly in his, he raised his other hand and smashed the amulet against the cave wall.

17

Nicknames

Luster: A Cave

"Our cousin is right, you know," said Gratz. "In bringing him back we have given up our names. We must find a new way to speak to one another."

"I say we use our old names, anyway!" cried Razka.

The others looked to Rocky, as they had so often when they were young. It was Rocky — Nedzik then, of course — who had always had the best ideas for games and pranks, the best ways to annoy the adults, the best suggestions for satisfying mischief.

Rocky looked at them for a moment, then said, "My name is gone, taken by the King. Yet in my heart I know that I am still myself and he had no right to do this. So I say, if the King thinks your names give him power over you, then take new ones to spite the tyrant!"

"But you said the name must be *given* to you," protested Razka.

"Then I give you the name Diamond," replied Rocky instantly. "For you are hard and sharp, and you have secret fire in your depths."

"Diamond," murmured his cousin. "*Diamond.* I like that!"

"What shall I be?" cried Erkza, the elder of the twins.

Rocky smiled. “That is easy. You were born first, so that should be your nickname. Greetings, First.”

“If he’s First then I want to be Smartest!” cried Rendzi, his younger-by-ten-minutes brother.

“No, no. Rocky has to choose your name for you,” repeated Razka, now known as Diamond. “The nickname must be *given* to you.”

“Well, I don’t want to be called Second! Or Last, either.”

“You shall be called Hammer,” said Rocky, after a moment’s consideration. “For you are strong and useful.”

“Hammer,” said Rendzi contentedly. “Good. I like that!”

“And me?” asked Zagrat.

“I know!” cried Gergga. “You should be Lizard!” When the others looked at him in puzzlement, he said, “Because of his tongue!”

Zagrat stuck out his tongue, which was famous for being the longest in all of Delvharken, and the others laughed. “All right,” he said, grinning. “I accept this . . . this . . . what is the word, Rocky?”

“Nickname.”

“I accept this nickname.”

“Now me!” cried Gergga.

“Waterfall,” said Rocky at once. “Because of the way you always won our pissing contests.”

“Waterfall!” said Gergga proudly. “Yes, I like that.”

That left only Gratz, who was soon named Pebble, because his smooth skin made him seem so young, and Wurtza, who was dubbed Wart, because of an unfortunate problem he had had as a delvling.

“Now we are outlaws together,” said Rocky when all the names had been properly bestowed.

A sudden somberness came over the group. Sensing their concerns, Rocky said, “To be an outlaw in the realm of a tyrant is an honorable thing! We are a free band of cousins, and that is an honorable thing as well!”

“Honorable,” murmured the others, though it was clear they were not quite convinced.

“Now that we are honorable exiles, what is it that we must do?” asked Waterfall.

“I told you, I want to seek my teacher.”

“And I told you he won’t speak to you, nickname or not,” said the delver now called Lizard.

“But he will!”

“What makes you so certain?”

“Because he, too, knows that the King is mad.”

Lizard narrowed his eyes. “Just who is your teacher?”

“You know I cannot tell you that!” cried Rocky, appalled at the question.

Lizard hooted derisively. “You call the King a tyrant. You scorn his punishment. You summon your cousins to rebellion and give each of us a new name and say it is an honor to be an outlaw. And yet you will not name your teacher? Are you a rebel . . . or just a big-talking coward with worms where your guts should be?”

The others gasped. A long, uncomfortable silence filled the cave. Finally Rocky nodded and said, “You are right, Lizard. The world is changing, and we must be free to change, too. It was my teacher’s wisdom that set me on this path. He will understand if I do this.”

“All right then, I ask it again: Who is your teacher?”

Rocky took a deep breath, then said softly, “Namza.”

“The king’s wizard?” whispered Diamond in awe.

“There is only one Namza,” said Rocky.

“Not even one,” said Lizard, his anger shifting to gloom. “Namza has disappeared.”

Rocky looked from face to face, hoping to see a sign that this was a joke, an attempt to tease him. But in his cousins’ eyes he saw only sad confirmation that it was true.

“Oh, my teacher,” he wailed. *“My teacher!”*

Falling to his knees, he buried his face in his hands and began to weep.

18

Feng Yuan and the Queen

Luster: Autumngrove

Late in the afternoon of their second day together, Belle the warrior and Feng Yuan the Hunters' girl arrived at Autumngrove.

"Belle!" cried the sentry who met her at the forest's edge. "The Queen will be glad to see you. You have been much on her mind. But who is it that you carry on your back?"

Belle hesitated, thinking of why she had brought Feng Yuan with her. Finally she replied, "She is a gift to the Queen."

When they were taken to Amalia Flickerfoot, Belle explained how she had met Feng Yuan and outlined the unusual knowledge that she possessed. The Queen gazed at the slender, dark-haired girl for a long time before saying, "So, you came here with Beloved to lure unicorns to their deaths."

Feng Yuan, who had her hand on Belle's shoulder so she could understand the Queen, nodded.

"Yet now you want me to believe that you are ready to work with us for Beloved's defeat?"

Again the girl nodded.

“Why should I trust you on this? It seems to me there is little that would please Beloved more than to have someone like you in our midst.”

Now it was not Feng Yuan who answered, but Belle who said, “The girl and I are in close contact. I have detected no deceit within her.”

“Yet one of our kind is dead because of her.”

“That is why I turned against them!” thought Feng Yuan passionately. “It was not until I saw the unicorn — and saw what the Hunters did to him — that I began to understand all this. It was not until I offered to let Belle slay me, but she instead forged a connection so we could speak mind-to-mind, that I knew I had been lied to all these years. Yes, I was raised to the Hunt. That does not mean I must remain its prisoner!”

Slightly embarrassed, Belle translated this for the Queen, who continued to gaze quizzically at the girl. Finally Amalia said, “Belle, would you mind if I established my own connection with her?”

Belle hesitated, feeling, to her own surprise, a flash of jealousy, of possessiveness. However, she was well aware that “She is *my* girl!” would have been a foolish answer. So she simply nodded and said, “As you wish, My Queen — assuming it is all right with Feng Yuan.”

When the girl had agreed and the Queen had pierced her chest to make it possible for them to talk directly, Amalia thought to her, “What is it you believe you can offer us?”

“Information, first. While I do not know everything about Beloved and her plans, what I do know I can share.”

“Belle seemed to think there is more you can do.”

Feng Yuan nodded modestly. “I understand war craft.”

Setting aside, for the moment, her own previous thoughts on the matter, Amalia responded, “This is not war, it is a Hunt.”

“That is what Beloved wants it to be. But why must you play by her rules? Are you born to be victims?”

Amalia’s eyes widened, and Feng Yuan thought quickly, “Excuse me! That was rude, and I apologize.”

“No, it was a question well asked. And, in truth, exactly what I have been contemplating. The answer, by the way, is ‘No, we were *not* born to be victims.’ But we have surrendered some of our fire, and we need to find a way to regain it. Worse, we are not schooled in the ways of war. These are not things we know, not skills we possess.”

“Happily, that is exactly what I can offer,” replied Feng Yuan. “Well, I cannot tell you how to regain lost fire. But I can assist with the preparation and the strategy for what is to come, for these things are what I have long studied.”

“Why have you studied them?” asked the Queen. “Who was your teacher?”

With this invitation, Feng Yuan explained how Wu Chen had taught her from *The Art of War* and how much of it was engraved on her memory. She told the Queen, too, how they had run simulations, where Wu Chen had asked her to apply what he had taught her to understanding great battles of the past and then, as her understanding grew, to new scenarios he created especially to test her.

“Have you ever tried this in real life?” asked the Queen.

“No,” answered Feng Yuan. “Have you?”

The Queen laughed. Turning to Belle, she said, “She’ll do.”

Amalia’s first act after accepting Feng Yuan’s help was to gather the council so that the girl could share with all of them what she knew. This was accomplished by Feng Yuan standing beside Belle, with one hand on her shoulder, and thinking what she wanted to say, which Belle would then translate for her.

“Beloved has come here with nearly five hundred men, all of them highly trained in ways to hunt and kill unicorns. I say ‘nearly’ five hundred because one Hunter has gone renegade and is now siding with the unicorns.”

Feng Yuan paused while Belle repeated this for the others, who were listening with rapt attention. She heard a sharp intake of breath from the Queen at the number five hundred, but when she turned toward Amalia, the Queen had composed her features and showed no sign of her shock.

“There are also two dozen Maidens of the Hunt, girls such as myself, who were brought along to help the Hunters. Our job is to lure a unicorn by our presence, so that a Hunter can then slaughter it.” She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then continued. “A maiden usually travels with a small group of Hunters. The first thing Beloved did when we came through was to send all these groups out, hoping for an early kill.” She hesitated again, swallowed, then said, “To my shame, I was part of one of them. As a result, a unicorn died.”

She trembled with grief as she confessed this, but she managed not to weep.

“For that death, I am deeply sorry. But seeing it happen was what opened my eyes and made me flee the Hunt. Now I want to try to atone for my crime.”

“How do you intend to do that?” asked Moonheart.

Receiving the question through Belle, Feng Yuan replied, “First, by telling you what I know. Beloved’s entry to Luster passes through the center of a vast tree, which is greater than any I have ever seen, or could even imagine.”

“The Axis Mundi!” cried the Queen. “I was certain these tremors were caused by what Beloved has done. But it never occurred to me that she had attacked the world tree itself.”

“I guessed that you must know of this tree,” said Feng Yuan through Belle. “You will find Beloved encamped in a meadow less than a mile southwest of that place. She expects you to be fleeing, disorganized, scattered. This is all right, for Sun Tzu tells us if we feign disorder we can crush the enemy.”

“Deception is not our way,” said Fire-eye gently.

“All warfare is based on deception!” cried Feng Yuan, quoting Sun Tzu directly. “These people are trying to destroy you! Do you not understand that?”

In her vexation, she had forgotten to think the words to Belle while she spoke, and had to repeat what she had said mind-to-mind. She caught her breath and tried to calm herself while Belle translated.

When Feng Yuan had herself under control, she thought to Belle, “Beloved believes you are fierce and dangerous, but foolish and disorganized.”

“Which, alas, is true,” replied Belle privately, before speaking the words out loud.

“To have her think this is not all bad,” continued Feng Yuan. “Let them continue to believe it. Encourage them in their error. Then you can trample them beneath your hooves.”

“The gentle ones — which is most of them — won’t like that trampling part,” thought Belle, before translating.

“They won’t like the dying part, either!” replied Feng Yuan fiercely.

“What do you advise?” asked Amalia, sensing that Belle and Feng Yuan were having a private conversation.

Feng Yuan thought to Belle, “Tell the Queen that Beloved will not expect you to march on her and attack her where she waits, and by this surprise you may gain victory.”

Belle translated. A long, uncomfortable silence fell over the clearing. Feng Yuan could feel Belle shifting impatiently and sensed that her friend wanted to speak out, but must wait for the Queen.

As for Amalia, she was gazing at her council, trying to judge them. She did not know them well enough, had not been Queen long enough, to feel she could truly read their faces, their hearts. At least three of them were trembling. But each of those three also, when she looked straight at them, nodded his or her assent.

“Of course we can do it,” said Amalia — hoping, even as she did, that Feng Yuan really was true of heart and not simply leading them into a trap.

19

Unicorn

Luster: The Slopes of Dark Mountain

The blaze of silver light that exploded from the amulet when Elihu shattered it so dazzled Cara that she could not see. But she could feel the light swirl around her before it flowed into her, feel it fill her veins, feel it invade her heart. Her body began to twist and stretch. She wanted to scream from the pain, but something deep in her brain remembered there were Hunters nearby and that to make any sound at all would be dangerous.

Nor was what she felt all pain. She had a sense, too, of joyous release, as if something long imprisoned within her was being set free.

"Elihu!" she whispered urgently, still unable to see. *"Elihu!"*

He did not answer. Instead she heard something that sounded like a moan of despair. Before she could call to him again she felt her fingers cleave together and was lost once more in the astonishment of her transformation. Her nails grew broad and thick, merged, began to flow up and back across her fingers. As they did, they became the silvery material of unicorn hoof.

She heard the rending of fabric as her clothing split and tore away from her. At the same time, a vigor and power she had never known flowered within her.

Now a sudden flare of pain, more intense than any she had ever experienced, did cause her to make a sound — not a cry, for what came from her throat was neither the voice of a human nor, yet, that of a unicorn.

The pain increased. Fire blossomed in her brow and her head felt as if it were about to split wide open. She would have grabbed at it and tried to tear it open herself, but she no longer had arms or hands, only long, slender forelegs that ended in cloven hooves.

Just as the pain passed the limit of what Cara thought she could endure, the source of it burst free as a pearly horn erupted from her forehead — the unmistakable mark and seal that the transformation was complete and she was now a unicorn.

Yet, still the light flowed around her, so thick and bright she felt as if she were breathing it.

She tried to call Elihu's name again, but rather than a human word, she uttered a cry that rang like silver as it echoed from the stone walls. She stopped, concentrated, and managed to speak his name. The word felt strange in her mouth and twisted her throat oddly. Her voice was deeper and so changed that she hardly recognized it as her own. That was oddly frightening in itself. Even so, she was relieved to find that the gift of tongues remained intact. It made no difference; there was still no answer from Elihu.

Her vision began to clear.

She looked around frantically.

Elihu was nowhere in sight — and she realized she had just made a possibly deadly mistake. Had the Hunters heard her?

Cara shook her head and was at once distracted by the feel of her newly sprouted mane flowing over her shoulders. She twisted her neck to survey the length of her body, then whisked her moon-white tail, just to make sure she could.

Part of her was quivering with delight.

Another part — a small, terrified voice deep inside — was wailing, *What have I done?*

And a third part, wiser and more alert, was urgently warning that whatever she had done, she was not safe yet, because Hunters still roamed the slopes of Dark Mountain, and even if they had been seeking a red-haired girl, they would gladly slay a unicorn if they happened across one. *Where is Elihu?*

She started toward the mouth of the cave and quickly discovered that walking with four legs was considerably more complicated than moving with only two. After a few stumbles — something she would have thought she could avoid now that she was a unicorn — she began to get a feel for it. Part of the trick, she realized, was to not think about it too much and just let her body do the work.

Cautiously, and still wobbly as a newborn filly, Cara made her way to the cave's entrance. As she neared it, she heard a shout and a roar down the mountainside and realized Elihu must have gone to distract the Hunters.

Cara's first urge was to race to his assistance. But that would bring her in direct contact with the Hunters — exactly what Elihu had been trying to avoid when he went to face them.

Moving more cautiously, she stepped forward to peer out.

Immediately she realized something that hadn’t been obvious to her while still in the cave: As a unicorn, her vision was more clear and far sharper than when she had been human.

It was also disturbingly different. Though it took her a moment to figure out why, she soon understood there were two major changes in how she was seeing, one exciting, one unnerving.

The first, the exciting thing, was that she could see much farther to each side than she ever had in her human form. Balanced against this, and very distressing, was the fact that there was a spot directly in front of her where her vision failed completely. Turning her head, she realized the changes were due to the way her eyes were now placed — not centered in her face, as when she had been a human, but at the sides of her head, just as with any unicorn.

Though the blind spot was annoying, she quickly decided that her expanded field of vision — she could see so far to each side it was as if she had been given extra eyes — made the trade worth it.

She took a moment to look, and listen — which was when she realized her hearing had improved as well.

Rising from the mountainside came the sounds of pitched battle — almost certainly Elihu fighting with the Hunters. She longed to go to his aid, but fiercely reminded herself that the whole reason he was fighting them was to give her a chance to escape.

What of Graumag? She had also been battling Hunters. How had that fight gone? Surely not well for the Hunters. But it was all too possible that the dragon could have been wounded, perhaps even killed, by their spears and arrows. Then another thought struck her.

Even if Graumag did escape, she would have no way of finding me now — or recognizing me if she did find me!

Making a quick, regretful decision, Cara headed *away* from the fighting. Glancing down at her legs again, she thought, *I'm so white! It will make me incredibly easy to spot.*

She decided it would be best to keep a screen of bushes between herself and the sounds of the fight. She tried to move faster than a walk, stumbled twice, and realized she wasn't anywhere near ready to run.

I'd better learn fast if I'm going to escape the Hunters! she thought nervously.

She continued to pick her way down Dark Mountain, making a long arc around the sound of fighting, until it finally faded behind her. When the cries of the men had vanished altogether, Cara tried to figure out her next move.

It was simple, actually. She had to make her way back to her grandmother and the unicorn court at Autumngrove. But which way was Autumngrove? With all that had happened, she had completely lost her sense of place and direction.

Of course, that assumed the unicorns were still at Autumngrove. Which brought on another thought: *Do the Hunters know where most of the unicorns have gathered? If so, how quickly will they be there?*

As she fretted about this, Cara discovered a new sense — not an improvement on an old sense, as with her vision and hearing, but one that she had not even guessed at: She *knew* where the unicorns were! Not every one of them; it was nowhere near that specific. But she could sense the mass of them, with her grandmother, Amalia Flickerfoot, at the center. It

was almost as if her heart were a compass and the great glory of unicorns true north.

Pointing herself in the direction her heart had given her, Cara began to move a little more rapidly.

High above, the clouds of Dark Mountain still loured and loomed. Lightning flashed and crackled, revealing a world that seemed at once horrifying and unbelievably beautiful.

Though her new body was graceful, Cara was still awkward within it, uncertain of how to use it, of how much space it took up. She had to learn her shape all over again — learn which branches she could duck under, which trees slip between. Yet her nimbling feet seemed already to have become almost immune to tripping, and while she more than once banged herself against a low-growing bough with a very un-unicorn-like clumsiness, she was soon trotting down the rocky slope with no fear at all of stumbling or sliding.

The strange reality of her transformation was still sinking in.

I'm a unicorn, she thought, over and over again. *A unicorn!*

It was a joyous feeling. Even so, troubling questions continued to run through her mind: *Will I ever be able to turn back? Do I even want to?* And, most compelling of all, *What will my mother and father think?*

That last question made her particularly uneasy. But she also took a bit of assurance from it, since it seemed to assume that she would indeed see them again.

Then she found herself asking a question that truly startled her, because it mattered more than she would have guessed: *What will Lightfoot think?*

This time she did not feel the comfort that had come from asking the same question about her parents, but she was not sure whether that was because the question had some deeper meaning or because she was afraid her dear friend was lost to her forever. The horrid memory of that cove of delvers swarming over Lightfoot as he battled to protect her shot like acid through her brain. She shook her head, trying to force the images to the farthest recesses of her mind.

Delvers, she thought unhappily. *One more thing I'll have to look out for.*

But she also found herself thinking of Rocky, who — though a delver — had become such a good friend. She wondered where he was now and if he would dare return to the Delverking's court to tell what he had learned about the Whisperer.

A little while later, Cara realized that though she was sure she was heading toward her grandmother and the unicorns, there were many things she did *not* know. What lay *between* her and her destination? Traveling in a straight line would be well enough, but what if she came to some river or gorge or mountain range she could not cross? How would she know the best path then? She could waste days — weeks! — trying to get around something like that.

How long would the journey take? Which raised a more important question: How much time did the unicorns have?

No more than a moment after that frightening query crossed her mind, she felt a sudden stabbing in her heart and was overcome with a sorrow so intense that it made her stagger. For a moment she was confused. Where had this feeling come from? What did it mean?

All too quickly she realized the answer. Somewhere a unicorn had just died.

Half-blinded by tears she had not known she could shed — did other unicorns weep, or was this an artifact of her human side? — Cara continued down the mountainside.

20

The Missing Teacher

Luster: A Cave

It took the newly nicknamed delvers a long time to calm their weeping cousin. This was not surprising. The relationship between a delver and his teacher is intense, almost sacred, and the news of Namza's disappearance was naturally disturbing, though even Rocky's cousins did not understand how deeply.

When Rocky had been chosen by the old stone wizard, he knew it had been a great honor. As the years rolled on, as he grew to treasure Namza's strength, power, and wisdom, his appreciation had turned to awe and then to love. With a few sad exceptions, all delvers love their teachers, but Rocky's feeling for Namza came close to worship.

However, it was not only this that had devastated Rocky when he learned Namza was missing. In all that had happened, all through his imprisonment in the dungeon of Delvharken, through his journey to the Valley of the Centaurs, through learning the appalling story of the birth of the Whisperer and how that dark force had shaped the delvers, Rocky had always believed he would eventually reconnect with Namza, and that his teacher would somehow make sense of it for him.

Now the world made no sense at all.

“I have to find him,” he said at last.

“And how do you expect to do that?” asked Lizard scornfully. “Gnurflax has had a dozen coves scouring Delvharken for Namza.”

“And the world above as well,” put in Waterfall.

“Without a pebble of luck,” added First.

“So why should you fare any better?” finished Wart.

“I’ll have to go back to Delvharken,” said Rocky stubbornly.

“You really *are* insane!” yelped Hammer.

Rocky flicked his left hand three times, a delver sign of rejecting a sentence. “As student and teacher, Namza and I are bound. You know very well that I am able to sense him in a way no one else can. Something has happened to him. He is missing, but that does not mean he is dead. I must try to find him.”

“But how do you expect to get into Delvharken without being arrested?” asked Pebble nervously.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll work that out when we get there. I had other plans for us, but this is what we must do now. We need Namza’s wisdom — not to mention his power.”

“But he is a servant of the King,” said Diamond. “What good will it do to find him? Will he not betray us?”

“It was Namza who first brought me to awareness of the King’s madness,” replied Rocky. “Why do you think I became a rebel? I did not work these things out on my own. It was my teacher who helped me see the world more clearly and gave me the strength to say no to the tyrant.”

“But he continued to serve that same tyrant!” protested First.

“Only so he could try to rein him in,” said Rocky. “I tell you truly, the tyranny would have been even worse without Namza pulling Gnurflax back from the greatest of his excesses.” He paused, then said, “Sit, my cousins. I will tell you more.”

The cove gathered around him, hideous faces looking up. “I am convinced that for some time now, the King has been in thrall to this voice that I told you of. It is a formless presence that speaks to him out of the darkness. And it is almost irresistible.”

The cove murmured nervously. Finally Lizard said, grudgingly, “That would explain the King's passage from wise ruler — well, somewhat wise — to the tyrant he has become.”

“Exactly,” said Rocky. “For a long time my teacher could not understand what was happening to Gnurflax and despaired of changing his course. When we met for learning sessions, Namza would speak to me of this, bemoaning that he no longer had the power to soften the King’s impulses.

“Finally he informed me of the rumors he had heard from the delver-guard, rumors of a voice speaking to the King from the darkness. He was reluctant to tell me much about it, but I am convinced that the story I learned from the Chiron, the story of the Whisperer tells us all we need to know. *That* is who is advising the King!”

Pebble moaned in despair.

“I know that Namza was spying on Gnurflax,” continued Rocky. “He wanted to learn more about this voice. I also know this had to be dangerous. Perhaps the Whisperer, who I am sure has powers we do not understand, caught him at it! Whatever happened, I tell you this: We *need* Namza.”

Lizard sighed. “So it’s back to Delvharken?”

“Yes,” said Rocky. “It is back to Delvharken. Once there, we will decide what to do.”

“Well, that’s about the most brilliant plan I ever heard,” muttered Waterfall.

Rocky ignored him.

21

The Tainted Crown

Luster: Valley of the Centaurs

The centaurs had assembled on a hillside that overlooked the arena where the contest to determine the next Chiron was taking place. The trials and tests had begun in the morning. Now the shadows were lengthening as both the day and the contest drew to a close.

In the center of the arena the two remaining combatants, Arkon and his old friend Basilikos, stood facing each other. They alone had made it through the earlier tests, which had started with races and leaping contests, but had grown ever more dangerous as the day wore on.

The final stage was simple but potentially deadly: hand-to-hand combat with sword and shield.

Arkon nodded to his opponent, who had been his friend since shortly after the two of them were foaled. Basilikos nodded back. His broad chest was heaving, but Arkon was sure he was far from exhausted. They were, in fact, almost evenly matched, something they both knew from years of friendly sparring with much less at stake. Indeed, in all those years they had never been able to determine who was the better. Now, at last, the matter would be decided for good. Arkon’s own arms ached, and his legs were

weary. He took solace only in the thought that, though not yet exhausted, Basilikos must be equally weary.

Even so, Basilikos had an advantage Arkon now lacked. In the throng that surrounded them stood Kallista, a golden beauty who loved him deeply. Basilikos fought in the warmth of Kallista's approving eye, and Arkon knew it gave him strength — just as it seemed to deaden his own soul that Arianna was nowhere in sight.

Foolishly, he took a moment to glance at the crowd, hoping, yet again, to see her face.

It was a mistake, a mistake he had repeated more than once through that long, difficult day. Basilikos, spotting his opponent’s momentary distraction, rushed forward.

Alerted by the hoofbeats, Arkon raised his shield just in time to fend off Basilikos’s sword, which descended in a sideswipe that would have ended the contest and, quite likely, Arkon’s life. Basilikos thundered past, wheeled, raced back. Their swords clanged against each other, then rang out again and again as they struggled at close quarters in the rays of the lowering sun.

At an impasse, each took a step back to gain new position. In the moment of quiet Basilikos said softly, “It should be me, Arkon. I will have a queen, as befits a Chiron. Yours has disappeared.”

A fury surged in Arkon’s heart. Yet he was too well trained, too disciplined, to let it lead him into foolish action.

“That was cruel of you, Basilikos.”

“I do not mean to be cruel. I am simply speaking the truth.”

The two continued to circle each other as they spoke, giving the appearance — which was accurate — that each was seeking an opening in the other's guard.

"Strike!" cried a voice from the hillside. "Strike, Basilikos!"

"Strike, Arkon!" cried another. And suddenly the silence ended as the hillside erupted in a cacophony of voices, all calling for the battle to rage anew.

And still the two warriors circled each other.

"I do not mean to be cruel," repeated Basilikos, loud enough to be heard above the clamor, but not loud enough for any but Arkon to hear. "We are equally matched, old friend. And each of us would make a fine Chiron. But whoever becomes Chiron should have his lady at his side. I do not know what has happened and it is not my business. But I do know that your lady is not here."

"We will not speak of that," said Arkon. Then he launched himself forward.

Once again their blades rang out and the hillside erupted with cheers. Strike, strike, and strike again, their swords flashed red in the sun, their shields rose and fell, faultlessly blocking each slash and thrust. They locked shields, broke from each other, then circled for a new rush. Basilikos bellowed a challenge, rearing on his hind legs. Arkon replied in kind.

And in that moment, disaster.

Without warning, the ground beneath them shook, then split. Basilikos, his front hooves plunging toward what had, but instants before, been solid earth, felt both feet continue downward into the narrow opening. Overbalanced, he toppled forward, carried by the force of his charge. The

ghastly snap of his front legs as they broke was lost in the horrified cries of the crowd. In the next instant silence fell, broken only by Arkon's cry of grief and Basilikos's wail of agony.

Flinging aside his blade, shaking off his shield, Arkon dropped to his knees beside his old friend.

"Basilikos," he cried. *"Basilikos!"*

Eyes glazed with pain, his beloved opponent shuddered, then murmured, "The combat goes to you, Arkon. Now, please . . . do what you know you must."

Tears streaming down his face, Arkon nodded. Shaking in his agony, Basilikos passed to his old friend the blade he had so recently raised against him. Their hands lingered for a moment, fingers intertwining, as Arkon took it from his grasp.

"Do not delay," pleaded Basilikos.

Arkon raised the blade. But before he could strike, another hand was on his arm.

"Arkon!" cried Kallista. "Arkon, do not do this!"

Basilikos looked up at her. "Please, Kallista, do not make this harder than it must be. You know I cannot go on."

"We are not beasts! You do not have to end like this!"

"There is no life for me after this, you know that, dear heart. Kiss me farewell, then let Arkon do what he must."

Sobbing, golden-haired Kallista dropped to her knees. Taking Basilikos's head between her hands, she kissed him full and fierce upon his paling lips. Then, with a sob, she cradled his head against her chest. "Do it now," she ordered Arkon, "now, while I am holding him."

Arkon raised his blade and did what was necessary.

Later that night, the new Chiron stood alone in the caves that came with his high office. In his hands, he held his crown, the mark of his triumph. But he could not bring himself to place it on his head. The victory had been forever tainted.

Arkon’s mouth twisted bitterly. He was about to fling the crown aside when he heard a noise at the mouth of the cave. Turning, he saw Kallista. Her eyes were red, her face ravished with weeping, but her hair gleamed like burnished gold in the flickering light of the torches.

He tried to speak, but could find no words.

“By custom and by law, I am yours now, Arkon,” she said, her voice low and husky. “And if I must submit, I will. But I tell you truly, if you have an ounce of sense you will go and find Arianna.”

“I grant you release, Kallista, for that is not a custom I will enforce. And I long to go and do just as you say. But how can I leave when there is such danger here? I am Chiron now. I must stay with my people.”

“Stay and protect your little kingdom?” she cried scornfully. “How long do you think this valley is going to last, Arkon? Something has gone wrong with the world. Don’t you understand that? Don't you feel it every time the ground shakes. Was not Basilikos' horrible death enough to prove it? If you want to do something for the centaurs, go and find out what it is.” She paused, drew a heavy breath, then said slowly, “If you want to honor your friend, and perhaps even redeem your crown, go and find out what is

happening.” Narrowing her eyes, she added fiercely, “I want to know why Basilikos had to die!”

22

Rude Awakening

Luster: the Stone Road

Ian’s search for a trail had been complicated by having to scan both sides of the stone highway for signs of where the delvers might have stepped away from it. The constant retracing of his path across that broad swath of rock, only to start again on the opposite side, was maddening. The task was complicated by the frequent rippling of the stone’s surface, which made it hard to keep his footing.

When darkness fell, Ian, frustrated and exhausted, paused for the night. He stopped not because he was tired, though he was. He could work past fatigue, could follow a trail in spite of deep weariness. It wasn’t his body that had failed him, it was the light.

Leaving the stone, he gathered some of the blue and silver fallen leaves and made a bed for himself on the floor of the adjoining forest. His makeshift mattress rustled beneath him, releasing a pleasantly spicy odor, part cinnamon, part something he had never smelled before, but somehow comforting.

Despite his weariness, sleep did not come easily. He was consumed with worry over Martha, Rajiv, and Lightfoot. Interlaced with these thoughts

were his questions about Fallon, and who — or what — he really was. And, of course, underneath it all was his desperation to find Cara. Finally, with the help of breathing techniques he had learned, ironically, during his training for the Hunt, he drifted off to sleep.

Yet Hunters, especially those on the Hunt, never sleep too deeply. So when some part of him, some never-resting part that stayed always alert and aware, detected danger, Ian gasped and sat up.

As it turned out, he didn’t need to find the delvers.

They had found him.

23

Night in the Forest

Luster: the Wilderness

Cara traveled well past nightfall, pleased to discover that as a unicorn she possessed more strength and stamina than she had ever known as a human. Of course, the travel was made easier by the fact that her new eyes could see so much better in the darkness. That happy understanding was undercut by a brief but piercing sorrow. Thinking of darkness and light had brought her to the sudden realization that she had left Medafil's sphere, which had lit her way through so many dark times, in the cave where her transformation had taken place. She didn't need it now, of course — and, no longer having hands, couldn't have carried it with her even had she wanted to. Yet she still felt a great sorrow at leaving it behind.

She was tempted to try to make her horn glow, as if to replace the sphere, but knew it would be foolish to do anything that might attract attention. Her main goal at the moment was stealth and secrecy. It was not merely Hunters she might encounter here in the nighttime forest. If there was one thing she now knew about Luster, it was that there was an enormous amount she didn't know — including what dangers might be lurking in the darkness. Had she not had the heart connection to the unicorns to assure her she was

heading the right way, she might have succumbed to sheer terror. As it was, she barely kept her fears at bay.

Despite her newfound strength, exhaustion finally set in, forcing Cara to look for a place where she could rest. She settled on a sheltered spot against a sheer rock wall, made more attractive by a nearby waterfall with a little pool at its base. Another rock wall towered on the far side of the pool.

No one can come up behind me this way, she told herself, trying to ignore the fact that the rock also reduced the directions in which she could run if she suddenly needed to escape some attack.

The night was cool, but that did not bother her as much as it would have were she still human. Thunder still rumbled over Dark Mountain, but she had come far enough down the slope that the sound was more distant. A light breeze playing through the trees brought a medley of smells to her broad nostrils which, like her eyes and ears, were far more sensitive now that she was a unicorn. Flickering bugs danced among the branches. They were larger than the fireflies she knew at home and glowed blue rather than yellow. Even so, she found them comforting.

The world is so beautiful, *she thought drowsily.* Why do people put such badness into it?

She remembered asking gentle Finder the same question and immediately felt a new wave of grief at the memory of his death.

Would the killing never end?

She was still trying — pointlessly, it seemed — to fall asleep, when a nearby sound roused her to instant alertness. Heart pounding in terror, she scrambled to her feet, ready to bolt into the darkness. But before she could move a small, furry figure bounded into the clearing.

“Stinky unicorn girl run too fast!” cried the Squijum, leaping to her shoulder. “Hotcha bad stinky girl leave good Squijum behind. Stinky, *stinky* unicorn girl!”

Cara heaved an enormous sigh, then laughed in spite of herself. “Squijum, you nearly gave me a heart attack!”

Instantly she felt a new flash of fear as she realized that with her own words she might have revealed her presence to anyone still hunting her.

“Shhhh!” she cautioned the Squijum. “Hunters may be after us!”

“Hotcha stinky no good Hunters,” replied the Squijum, his own voice hushed now.

“I’m glad you found me, Squijum,” said Cara softly.

She was amazed at how true the statement was. Small and silly as the creature was, her heart felt easier for having him with her. She tried to reach up to stroke his fur and realized with fresh shock that it was a move she could no longer make.

“How did you find me, anyway? How did you know it was *me?”*

“Smart Squijum know friends!” he chittered, as if answering the most foolish question imaginable. “Squijum hotcha good friend! Squijum hotcha good hunter!”

“Don’t say that,” she whispered with a shudder.

“Not all hunters bad,” muttered the Squijum sulkily.

“No,” she agreed. “Some, like you, are very, very good.”

“Hotcha smart girl,” he said, curling up on her back.

“Wait. Let me lie down first. I have to rest.”

Settling on her side, Cara gazed at her front hooves once more, and was surprised to see that the right one had a small but distinct lump. This

puzzled her, until she realized that — unlike her clothing — M'Gama's ring was still with her. Something about that seemed comforting — as did the presence of the Squijum, who had nestled inside the arch of her long, graceful neck. He was no real protection, of course. But with his sensitive ears, he would act as an early warning system. Besides, she felt better simply for having him there.

Despite Cara's nagging fears about the Hunters and the strangeness of her new body, she began to drift toward sleep. The bubbling plash of the little waterfall — oddly peaceful for a world tilting into chaos — helped soothe her way.

She was not sure how long she had been sleeping when the first tremor woke her. It was brief and not too bad. But as she was trying to fall back into slumber, a second tremor, much stronger, dislodged an enormous boulder from the rock wall on the far side of the stream. Twice the height of the Dimblethum, the rock landed with a crash that sent an explosion of muddy water slamming against Cara and the Squijum.

She leaped to her feet, her heart thudding. The Squijum clung to her mane, trembling and scolding, though he couldn't seem to determine where to direct his wrath.

Completely filthy, she longed to plunge into the pool, which was starting to grow larger as water collected behind the fallen boulder. But given what had happened, the idea seemed terrifying. Wet and miserable, she decided to move on, despite the fact that it was still dark. She knew there was no chance of falling asleep again, and their place near the rocky scarp suddenly seemed not a safe haven, but a deadly trap.

24

A Message For Beloved

Luster: the Wilderness

The greatest glory of unicorns ever assembled flowed like a tide of moonlit water through the forests of Luster.

At the front of the glory strode Amalia Flickerfoot, head high, senses alert. She was flanked on the right by her brother, Moonheart, on the left by Belle, who was being ridden by Feng Yuan. Other members of the council, including Fire-Eye and Silvertail — the latter often ridden by Alma Leonetti — stayed close by as well.

Though the Queen did not show it, did not allow herself to show it, she was weary.

Her weariness came not from traveling. In fact she reveled in the strength and endurance of her unicorn form, which was such a change from the body of the old woman she had grown to be as a human! But as tired as her human body had sometimes become, the fatigue the Queen felt now was far deeper — an exhaustion of heart and spirit that came from the relentless responsibility of being the one all the others turned to in this time of danger. It was a kind of responsibility she had never thought to shoulder, a responsibility that did not lift for a single moment, waking or sleeping. The

unicorns of Luster — even Moonheart, grumble though he might — had put their faith and trust in her, and it was a fearsome burden. No matter what else she was doing, what else she was thinking, a ribbon of worry ran constantly through the back of her mind: Was she leading her people into triumph — or catastrophe?

Though she was relying on Feng Yuan for strategy, the Queen's chief confidante during this time was Alma Leonetti, whose calm wisdom was something she needed and appreciated. Even so, she would have been happier still to have M'Gama with her. One of the many threads of worry tugging constantly at her heart was the disappearance of the Geomancer.

It was not till well after darkness fell on their first day of travel that Amalia ordered the glory to halt for the night's rest. They were in a forested area, bordering a large meadow. She was just lowering her head to drink from a stream that ran through the center of their gathering place when the guards set up a cry of, "Dragon above! Dragon above!"

Amalia felt a lift of hope. Perhaps Cara's mission had been successful! Moving with unicorn silence, she turned and headed eagerly in the direction of the commotion. The Gathered Glory was large, and though all stood aside for her when they realized who she was, it took several minutes to pass through it. Along the way she was joined by Moonheart, as well as Belle and Feng Yuan.

As they emerged from beneath the towering trees, Amalia saw, by the light of the rising moon, a dragon crouching about a hundred feet away. She was fairly small for her kind, though frighteningly large nonetheless. Her batlike wings were folded at her sides, the points of the largest joint nearly meeting above her shoulders. Her burnished scales shimmered bronze and

green in the moonlight, and a hint of scarlet flame flickered about her nostrils.

She would have been quite beautiful, if not so terrifying.

Despite her initial relief at the creature's arrival, Amalia's heart clenched. Where was Cara?

The unicorns who had gathered at the edge of the forest — they were keeping a respectful distance from their visitor — parted to make way for the Queen. Moonheart, Belle, and Feng Yuan continued beside her as she approached the dragon.

"I'll be fine on my own," she murmured.

"All well and good, Amalia," responded her brother. "Even so, we will stay beside you."

She decided not to fight about it. Stopping in front of the dragon, she said, "Greetings, Graumag. It is good to see you again." Despite her words of welcome she looked past the dragon, as if searching for something, then said in worried tones, "You come alone. I had hoped you would bear a rider."

"You mean your granddaughter."

"Ah, then you have met Cara! But why is she not with you? Has something happened?"

Graumag replied softly, "Yes, Amalia, something has happened."

Only the briefest flicker in the Queen's eyes betrayed her reaction to these words, but Graumag caught it and said quickly, "I would speak to you in private."

The Queen hesitated, then turned to the unicorns still gathered at the edge of the wood. "No need to be concerned!" she called. "The Lady Graumag

has come at my request. I must have a conference with her. Please leave us in peace."

She heard a reluctant murmuring, but the unicorns turned and like white shadows drifted slowly back among the trees. Moonheart and Belle, however, did not move. Moonheart shifted uneasily. "Are you sure it's a good idea to send them away?" he asked.

"It will be all right, brother. As I've explained, Graumag is an old friend. We met in the days when I was known as the Wanderer." She returned her attention to the dragon, not noticing that Moonheart and Belle stayed in position. "May I assume my granddaughter told you the story of how I returned to my true shape?"

Graumag merely nodded.

Fighting to control her voice, Amalia said, "What is it that you want to tell me about her?"

"As I said, I would prefer to speak to you in private."

Amalia looked behind her, sighed, then said, "Clearly my power as Queen is limited. However those who remain with me are my closest advisors and anything you tell me I will soon share with them, anyway."

"All right then. In short, your granddaughter has disappeared."

The Queen felt her knees buckle, almost as if there had been another tremor. But this time the disturbance was in her heart, not the surface of the world. "What do you mean?" she whispered.

"This morning your granddaughter and I were flying from Dark Mountain to join you when an attack by a group of Hunters forced us to backtrack. Shortly after I had landed in what seemed like a safe place, a

man named Elihu joined us. He claimed to be the one who forged the Queen's Five and gave some proof that he had indeed done so."

"What kind of proof?" demanded Moonheart.

Graumag recounted how Elihu had made Cara's amulet respond to his commands.

Moonheart scowled. "Moving things that way is not beyond the skill of even a minor wizard. Even so, the amulets have considerable power of their own. It is unlikely any but the most skilled of magic makers could do such a thing. I don't like this, Amalia, but the man may have been telling the truth." He paused, then added, "There's probably some story about the forging of the amulets, but I certainly can't recall it. For once I actually wish that annoying Grimwold was with us."

The Queen merely nodded, then said, "What happened next?"

"Moments later we heard Hunters approaching. Elihu snatched Cara into his arms and disappeared into the forest. I chose to stay and ward off the Hunters. There were a surprising number of them, by the way, which seemed to confirm what I had suspected and that Elihu had claimed: they had been sent specifically to find Cara. I managed to deal with a fair number of them. Indeed, some of them will never hunt again, though this victory was not without cost."

Here she shifted a wing, revealing a long wound scored along her right side.

"I can heal that for you, if you would allow," said Moonheart.

"A generous offer," Graumag replied. "However it would weaken you — I know how healings work — at a time when you need to be at full strength. And I heal fast enough on my own. It will be well by morning. Now,

despite these wounds I fought on. Unfortunately, there were more than I could handle, and some Hunters managed to slip past me. By the time the ones remaining — well, the ones who could still move — had fled, Elihu and Cara had disappeared as well. I searched for them for hours, but it was as if they had vanished into thin air. I finally gave up that quest, deciding I should seek you out instead."

The Queen closed her eyes, struggling to contain her feelings. At last she said, "What was your sense of this Elihu?"

"My contact with him was brief, but I will say that I did not detect any malice or evil. If I caught anything, it was a profound sadness. Still, I am troubled that I was not able to locate either him or Cara after I had dealt with the Hunters. Some Hunters did get past me, so it's possible they were taken, but that seems unlikely. In truth, regarding those two I am more mystified than worried."

Amalia breathed deeply. "Thank you. That is good to know." She paused for a moment, then said, "When I sent Cara to you it was to seek your help in the struggle against the Hunters. Did she deliver that request?"

"She did, and I have agreed to do so."

The Queen nodded. "For that, my thanks as well." She paused again, then continued quietly, "My intent had been to ask you to help us defend ourselves. However, I now have an additional request."

"Which is?"

"Beloved is encamped in an open field not far from the Axis Mundi. Would you be willing to deliver a message to her?"

The dragon looked startled. "If her Hunters feel the same way about dragons as they do about unicorns, I am not sure I will survive long enough

to get the words out. But I am willing to try."

"Again, I thank you."

"Amalia," said Moonheart. "What do you have in mind?"

The Queen managed a wan smile. "Strategy, dear brother. Strategy."

"And what is this message you would like me to deliver?" asked Graumag.

"Tell Beloved that Amalia Flickerfoot, Queen of the Unicorns, asks if she and her Hunters have the courage to meet the unicorns at noon three days hence. If she agrees, we will face them in the field northeast of the great tree, where all shall finally be decided."

Graumag looked at her in astonishment.

Feng Yuan, however, smiled.

"Will you deliver this message?" asked the Queen.

"I think it is madness, but I am willing to do as you request," replied the dragon.

"Then go with my great thanks. Travel safe, travel well. May the Powers Bright be always with you."

"And with you," said the dragon.

When Graumag had departed, Feng Yuan said, "Well done, O Queen."

"Well done?" demanded Moonheart furiously. "I agree with Graumag! This is madness. Why tell Beloved when and where we intend to meet her?"

"What makes you think that is what I have done, brother mine? As Feng Yuan has been teaching me, 'All warfare is based on deception.' "

In her heart, the Queen felt some sorrow at having deceived the dragon. But dragons do not lie, and the only way Graumag could tell Beloved what

Amalia wanted her to hear was if the dragon had no idea of her true plan.

25

The Delver and the Hunter

Luster: the Wilderness

It was full night, and Rocky and his band of rebels were making good progress toward their underground world. Fear had been their primary companion on their journey, a fear that escalated every time another tremor disturbed the surface of Luster. Even so, Rocky found himself taking a strange comfort in the tremors. Oh, the quakes were terrifying — probably more terrifying for the delvers than anyone else, given that they lived underground. But they also provided undeniable proof that something horrible was happening, proof that kept his still-nervous cousins from growing mutinous.

What baffled Rocky now was that they had not passed any unicorns. It wasn't that the things were so numerous you ran across them in every grove and clearing; happily, a delver could travel for days without actually seeing one of the silvery beasts. But delvers could sense the creatures from several hundred feet away, and neither he nor any of his cousins had ever been on the surface this long without at least knowing they had passed near one.

Where had they all gone?

Rocky was pondering this question when they came to the familiar swath of stone called by delvers “the Great One’s Highway.”

Delvharkonians always thought it was odd that the parts of the world they liked best — the areas where the surface was, sensibly, covered with stone — were also the least comfortable, because there was nothing to shield them from the big sky and the terrible sun. They loved the Great One’s Highway, but only traveled it at night. To their horror, when they stepped onto it now they discovered that the highway’s surface, once so smooth it looked as if it had been crafted by delvers rather than risen naturally, was cracked and broken.

The delver who used to be called Gergga began to weep.

“Stop that!” snapped Zagrat, now known as Lizard. “Your nickname may be Waterfall but that doesn’t mean you have to snivel all over the place.”

“But . . . but the highway,” moaned Waterfall, drawing his arm across his nearly nonexistent nose.

“I know,” said Lizard, his voice softening. “It’s terrifying.”

“Shhh!” hissed Rocky. “Listen — there’s someone ahead of us!”

They froze, each straining his oversized ears to catch any sound that might indicate danger. What they soon heard was not something that most humans would have caught — the sound of someone not far ahead breathing, deep and slow and still.

“Asleep,” whispered Diamond.

“On the highway?” asked First.

“No, off to the side,” replied his twin, Hammer.

The delvers crept forward, prisoners of curiosity. When they reached the place the sound was coming from, they glanced at one another, then stepped

off the stone to surround the sleeping man. Despite their ability to move with near perfect silence, he somehow sensed them. Sitting up with a shout, he put his hand to the sword strapped to his waist.

Rocky suspected that the sounds that came from the man's mouth were supposed to mean something, but not knowing the human tongue — actually, Cara had told him they had many languages, which must be wildly confusing — he had no idea what that meaning might be.

To his amazement, the man paused, then said to them in perfect delvish, "Stay back!"

The cousins glanced from one to the other, but left it to Rocky to answer. Raising his hands, he said, "We do not want to fight. Do you see us rushing at you, weapons raised and ready?"

"I see that you surrounded me while I was sleeping."

Hand still on the hilt of his sword, the man got to his knees, which put him at about eye level with the delvers.

Rocky gasped, and it was all he could do to keep from blurting out, "We have met before!" This was the same Hunter that Lightfoot and Cara had been fleeing a few months back — the Hunter that Rocky and his cove had misdirected, so the Prince and Cara might escape his attention.

For a moment Rocky was offended that the man did not recognize him as well, taking it as yet another sign that in the eyes of humans all delvers looked alike. On second thought, though, he was just as glad. He had a sense that things had shifted, and he was not yet sure in what way.

"If you do not want to fight, why did you surround me?" demanded the man, drawing Rocky's attention once more.

“We were curious, that is all. But a far more curious matter than why a human was sleeping next to the Great One’s Highway is this: How is it that you speak our tongue? This is not a common thing among humans.”

The hint of a smile twitched at the corners of the man’s mouth. “It is an enchantment, one that served me well the night I entered the delver world and spoke to your King.”

Cautiously Rocky said, “And are you a friend of King Gnurflax?”

The man appeared startled by the delver’s response. “Would friendship with the King be a bad thing?” he asked, clearly avoiding a direct answer.

Rocky cursed himself for having been so obvious. Speaking aloud, he said evasively, “It is always good to be on good terms with those in power.”

“I am seeking to meet with Gnurflax once more,” replied the man, again without declaring allegiance. “Alas, I am having a harder time finding my way underground than I did before.”

Still probing, Rocky asked, “Why is it you wish to meet with our honored King?”

“He has something I want. I am hoping to bargain with him for its return.”

“What would that be?” asked Rocky.

The man hesitated, apparently trying to decide how much to reveal. Finally — and from the desperate look in his eye Rocky could tell the man was taking a gamble, hoping to learn something in return — he said, “I believe he has my daughter.”

And suddenly all the pieces connected as Rocky remembered the things Cara had told him while they were traveling together. “You are Cara’s father!” he cried.

Ian Hunter looked at him in surprise. “How do you know that?”

“Cara is my friend! We have been imprisoned together, traveled together, faced monsters together, and, yes, saved each other’s lives.”

The man scrambled to his feet. “Do you know where Cara is now?”

Rocky, noticing the eager look in the man’s eyes, chose his words carefully. “We parted company some time ago. She was fine when I left her __”

“But she did escape the delver dungeon?”

Rocky patted his left shoulder, a delver sign of affirmation. “We escaped together! She is a brave girl.”

The man heaved an enormous sigh of relief, then repeated his earlier question: “Where is she now?”

“The last time I saw her, the gryphon Medafil was about to fly her to the unicorn court. I cannot say for sure that they arrived, but the gryphon is, for all his foolishness, brave and faithful.”

“Thank you,” said Ian, his words carried on an enormous sigh. “This is a great relief to me.”

Rocky looked at him appraisingly. Finally he said, “For this information, I would ask a boon.”

“And what would that boon be?” asked Ian, too wary to grant such an open request.

“I must return to Delvharken. Because I am seen as a traitor, this will be a difficult thing. However, if you were to escort me, taking me as if I were a prisoner you intended to return to the King, we could pass without a problem. Once we are far enough underground, you can release me to do my business and return to the surface.”

Ian shook his head. “I’m sorry. I would like to help you in this, but I must return to my friends. I need to tell my wife that Cara is safe!”

Rocky lunged forward and took Ian’s hand, pressing it to his forehead. “I have given you information you desire. For that you owe me. Set that aside, and consider this: I go to seek one who may be able to stop the doom that is overtaking this world. Can he save us? I do not know. What I do know is that terrible things are happening. Think how many will die — delvers, dragons, centaurs, unicorns, so many others — should this world collapse.”

“But my wife . . .”

“There is a world at stake. Your daughter is in this world.”

Ian froze. If Cara was no longer a prisoner in Delvharken, he would have to begin his hunt for her all over again. That could take weeks, months even. But according to Fallon he didn’t have months. Luster was unlikely to last for more than a few days.

And if Luster died, Cara died as well.

“Can this person —”

“Not person. Delver.”

Ian sighed. “Can this delver you seek really save Luster?”

Rocky shook his head. “I told you, I cannot guarantee that. I know only that he is the single hope I can think of.”

Ian turned to look back along the broken and fissured path. “Forgive me, Martha,” he whispered. Returning his gaze to Rocky, he said, “All right, I will go with you. But let us start now. I have no time to waste.”

“None of us do,” replied Rocky grimly.

As if to prove his point, another tremor shook the ground beneath them, opening a foot-wide fissure in the stone highway.

The delvers cried out in horror.

Seeing the look on Ian's face, Rocky said, "We are not cowards. But it hurts us to see the stone torn this way." He turned to his cousins. "You have heard what I intend to do. This saves you from having to go below with me. I ask Lizard to be your leader until I return. Do you accept this?"

The cousins nodded their assent.

"But what shall we do while you are gone?" asked Lizard. "Where shall we look for you?"

Rocky hesitated. While he was thinking, Ian said, "Do you know what has caused the world to shake this way?"

"Yes. The woman called Beloved has opened a gate between your world and ours."

"And do you know where that gate is?"

Rocky turned to his cousins. They shook their heads.

"There is a great tree," began Ian.

"The tree?" wailed Rocky in horror. "She damaged the great tree?"

"She came straight through it."

The delvers groaned.

Rocky turned to them. "If I can find Namza, I am certain that is where he will want to go. You should go there now and wait in the forest beyond the meadow that surrounds the tree. When I arrive, I will make another cousin-call —"

"Have you lost your mind?" interrupted Pebble. "It took all we had to bring you back the last time you did that!"

"You will be close by, and you will be expecting the call. It will not be nearly so difficult. And if I have Namza with me, he can keep me from

going too far. Waterfall, will you lend me your rope?”

“What for?”

“I will need the human to bind me before we go underground. Otherwise they will not believe I am a prisoner.”

Though he shuddered at the idea, Waterfall stepped forward and handed the coil of rope to his cousin. Then he crossed his arms over his chest and bowed.

The other cousins repeated the gesture.

Rocky returned the farewell, then prodded Ian and said, “You should do the same. It would be courteous.”

When Ian had complied, Rocky said, “All right, follow me.”

Without another word, the two unlikely companions began to trot along the fractured, stony highway.

26

"To the Surface!"

Luster: Delvharken

Delvharken was in chaos. Each new tremor that shook the world drove increased fear into the hearts of those who made their home far beneath the surface of Luster.

In his terror, King Gnurflax spent hours in the private cave where he went to listen to his secret friend, calling on him for help, for advice.

But the Whisperer never came.

Where can he be? wondered the delver king. *What could have happened to him?* And in his stony heart rose another question, a question he tried desperately to ignore: *Has he betrayed me after all?*

Gnurflax's worries were made worse by the fact that his second most trusted advisor was also missing. The wizard Namza had been with him from the time he, Gnurflax, was but a delvling. Since it was impossible for Gnurflax to imagine that the old magician had abandoned him, he believed something worse must have happened. After all, Namza often ventured into the deepest areas of Delvharken, seeking the great secrets he believed to be hidden there; it seemed only too likely that the old wizard had roused one of the terrible beasts that lived down there and had paid the price for it.

The King's frettings were interrupted by a guard standing at the mouth of the cave, shouting, "King Gnurflax! King Gnurflax!"

Spinning about in a rage, the King screeched, "Have I not given orders that I must not be disturbed?"

The guard looked terrified, but Gnurflax had the uneasy feeling that he himself was not the one who had instilled that terror. "You have indeed, O King. But there is a mob in the throne room calling for you. If you do not come, we fear . . . we fear . . ."

"You fear *what*, you fool?"

The guard looked helpless. "I don't know what. We just fear."

As he spoke, another tremor rocked the ground where they stood. An enormous boulder fell from the ceiling of the cave, barely missing Gnurflax.

"Come, My King," cried the guard. "This place is not safe!"

What he did not say, but they both knew, was that at this moment there were *no* safe places in Delvharken.

The King flinched when they reached the great cavern that housed the Stone Throne. They approached through a secret passage known only to the royal family and their guards. It led to an entry behind the throne. Even before he stepped inside, Gnurflax could see that the chamber was full, more full than it had ever been, filled not just by delvers, but by terror — a terror so thick he felt as if it were choking him, filling his lungs where the air should be.

"The King!" chanted the crowd. "Where is the King?"

Swallowing hard, Gnurflax stepped around the throne. At once a cry went up from the closest delvers. "The King! The King!"

The chant was picked up by the ones behind them. It rolled toward the far side of the cavern like a wave, echoing from the stone walls, then rolled forward again. Gnurflax, realizing he could not be seen by those in the rear, made a quick decision and climbed onto the Stone Throne, standing on the seat to make himself more visible.

"The King!" cried the delvers again.

Gnurflax raised his hands for silence, which came, though very slowly. When all had at last fallen still, when the final echoes had died, the King spoke. His voice was weak at first, and he was uncertain of what to say. Faltering, hesitant, he felt a secondary fear, a fear of losing the crowd.

And then, like a miracle, a soothing voice whispered in his ear, "Be brave, and speak as I tell you."

Filled with unexpected courage, Gnurflax threw back his shoulders. His voice rolled out over the assembled delvers as he repeated the words the Whisperer now gave him.

"O my people, terror is indeed upon us! But are we not delvers? Are we not made of stone and sinew, with hearts too hard for fear? Yes, the world shakes. But whose fault is that? The blame can only lie in one place. It must be the unicorns!"

"The unicorns!" responded the delvers, as if they suddenly understood.

"They have betrayed us somehow," roared Gnurflax, feeling his own courage return as he tried to pump bravery into his subjects. "It is *their* fault Delvharken trembles, their fault that stone shakes, walls crumble, boulders fall. For too long have we allowed these parasites to live on the surface of our world. We must repent our weakness and destroy our foes."

"Destroy our foes!" echoed the delvers.

Still prompted by the Whisperer, Gnurflax cried, “O my delvers, will you follow me to the surface? The air may be hot and dry. The light may blind and pain us. But it is there that we will find the enemy. It is there that we will engage the enemy. It is there that we will, at last, *destroy* the enemy. Whatever the unicorns have done, it will end once we end their reign over the surface. To save Delvharken, will you follow me above, follow me even into the accursed light?”

“We will!”

“Then it is war at last!” cried Gnurflax.

Another temblor shook the cavern. Stalactites broke loose, plummeting from the ceiling like spears of stone, then shattering as they hit the floor. Screams of pain sounded from three or four places where delvers had been struck.

“See to the wounded!” cried Gnurflax. Then he grabbed his own spear and leaped from the Stone Throne. Amid screams and cheers, he pushed his way to the far side of the cavern, on into the tunnels that led to the surface. Despair gone, his heart pumped with fierce energy and growing pride.

Behind him streamed his delvers, some powered by fear, some by anger, all ready to invade the surface and destroy the ancient enemy — an enemy to whom they were bound by a history more puzzling than any of them could imagine.

27

The Dimblethum

Luster: the Stone Road

Cara and the Squijum were walking through the mist of the early morning forest, which swirled silvery around Cara's silver hooves. She was slowly growing used to her new body and continued to delight in the ways that it was stronger and had so much more endurance than the human form she was used to. That, combined with her sharpened senses — especially her eyesight — had made night travel fairly easy. It hadn't actually lasted very long, since it turned out it had been fairly close to morning when that second tremor had made sleep impossible.

Being wet and filthy from the great mud splash had made the first hour of travel extremely uncomfortable. But then they had come to another stream — this one with no cliffs nearby — and had managed to clean themselves up.

Now both she and the Squijum were wet and bedraggled, but the exertions of travel kept them from being too cold.

Just before a hint of light glimmered in the sky, the Squijum bounded off in search of something to eat. Cara decided to do the same, without the bounding part, then realized to her dismay that she didn't know what was safe to eat and what was not.

I wish I'd paid more attention to what Lightfoot and the others ate, she thought, spitting out some particularly distasteful leaves. After several unhappy experiments she found some sprouts that tasted fairly good. She was nibbling at them — hoping they wouldn't make her sick and wishing that sunberries were still in season — when she heard a soft groan.

She looked around, but could see nothing. Then she realized that her newly sharpened senses had deceived her again; the sound was coming from much farther off than she had realized.

She listened again and heard another moan.

Certain now of the direction, she moved cautiously down the slope toward a pair of large trees. Despite the moans, she was not prepared for what she found when she stepped around them.

Slumped on the ground, cradled between the thick roots of a quilpum tree, was the Dimblethum.

Cara stared at the great creature in horror. Her reaction came not from his shockingly strange form, for she was long used to his looking like a bear who had started to turn into a man. It was what had happened to him that chilled her blood. Her friend — so frightening in size and appearance, yet so gentle in his dealings with her — had clearly been in a terrible fight. His eyes were closed, his head lolled back, and his thick fur was matted with blood. Cara hoped, at first, that it was the blood of his foes. Alas, it didn't

take her long to see that the blood was flowing from his own wounds — from more wounds than she could quickly count.

He had fallen silent. Despite the moans that had drawn her to him, she suddenly feared he must be dead. She panicked, but a moment later he shifted slightly, and she felt a lift of hope. She moved closer, stumbling as she did, not because of her new body, but because the tears welling in her eyes made it hard to see.

She found herself wishing, oddly, that the Squijum would return from his hunting so she would not have to face this horrible moment alone.

Her approach was so quiet that her friend did not notice she was there until she said softly, “Dimblethum, what has happened to you?”

The Dimblethum twitched, then slowly opened his eyes. “Unicorn,” he muttered in that low, rumbling voice she had come to love. “Dimblethum is sorry, unicorn. Dimblethum did a bad thing.”

Cara realized what she should have understood at once: Though the Squijum had managed to recognize her in her new form, it was unlikely anyone else would know who she really was.

“Dimblethum,” she said gently. “It’s me. Cara!”

The great creature’s eyes widened. Then he nodded, too weak to do more. His head lolled again, and she wondered whether he had really heard her.

“What has happened to you?” she repeated.

“Dimblethum fought Hunters,” he growled slowly, not opening his eyes. “Dimblethum crunch Hunters. Hunters cut Dimblethum.”

“What were you doing on Dark Mountain to begin with?”

He moaned, then murmured, “Looking for Cara.”

“I’m Cara,” she repeated softly.

The Dimblethum nodded, and his eyelids slowly closed again. “Yes. You told Dimblethum.”

It was only then that Cara realized the second thing she should have known at once. She possessed — or, at least, *might* possess — the ability to heal him. Was there enough of the unicorn in her to do that? Did it take special training? She didn’t know, knew only that she had to try.

She paused, remembering how such a healing always drained Lightfoot. Were there still Hunters in the area? If so, it would be dangerous — possibly fatal — for her to lose consciousness, as could happen after a healing.

She shook her head, irritated at herself. The Dimblethum had saved her life when she first entered Luster and saved it more than once since then. What did it matter if doing this would endanger her? How could she not try to help her friend if she had the ability to do so?

“Listen, Dimblethum, I’m going to try to heal you.”

His eyes flew open. “No!” he growled, “No! Do not do that!”

“But you are so badly wounded.”

“Cara must not do this.”

“Why? I want to help you.”

To her astonishment, he managed to stagger to his feet, roaring, *“Do not touch the Dimblethum!”*

She drew back, frightened of him, which was a terrible feeling.

With a cry of despair the Dimblethum stumbled away from her, leaving the unicorn girl baffled and heartbroken.

28

A Split in the Road

Luster: the Wilderness

Ian Hunter and his unexpected delver companion had been trotting along the stone highway for an hour or so when Ian asked, “How long will it take to reach Delvharken?”

“Not long,” replied the delver in his rasping voice. “At this pace we should be there in less time than it takes for true dark to fall after the wretched sun has finally set.”

It took Ian a moment to realize that the delver was describing the period of dusk. It was a vague measure of time, but clear enough to let him know they were within another hour of reaching Delvharken. Closer than he had dared hope!

They continued in silence for a time, though Ian kept glancing down at the delver, trying to comprehend that his daughter had actually befriended the hideous creature. Wondering if he could do the same, he asked, “What is your name?”

“I have no name.”

Ian made a sound of disbelief.

“No, truly. The King took my name as punishment for my being a rebel. However I do have a nickname! Cara gave it to me. It was a great gift, because I had never known about nicknames until she explained them to me.” He glanced up at Ian, “Is it true that you used to call her ‘Pookie’?”

Ian’s chuckle was cut short by an unexpected wave of grief as the question brought back full force the loss of so many years of his daughter’s childhood. “It’s true,” he said at last, pushing the words past the lump in his throat.

“It is an interesting nickname. I thought, at first, that she was going to call me Pookie. But she decided to call me Rocky instead. I like this nickname. It makes me proud.” He paused, then added, “What shall I call you?”

“Ian.”

“All right . . . Ian.”

They continued to trot in a surprisingly companionable silence, the delver easily keeping pace with Ian’s longer legs. As they passed a large boulder, Rocky said, “That is a marker. We are not far now.”

The words had barely left his lips when a tremor — the most powerful one Ian had felt so far — shook the rock. With a horrible grinding sound the ribbon of stone split, opening a crevice that ran straight across the full width of the stone highway.

“Rocky, watch out!” cried Ian. He managed to leap over the gap himself, but his warning was too late. Rocky, with his shorter legs, tumbled in.

Turning at the delver’s cry, Ian dropped to his belly and peered into the crevice. The opening was frighteningly deep. Even worse, he could see no sign of his delver companion.

“Rocky!” he called. “Rocky, are you all right?”

After a nerve-wracking silence, a quavering voice responded, “I’m here. I am in pain, but I do not think I am broken.”

“Can you climb out?”

“I don’t think so. The walls are smooth and they slope inward. I am on a ledge. I fear falling again. And . . . Ian, I don’t think there is a bottom!”

Ian rolled his eyes at this, then suddenly found himself wondering if it might be true. He thought for a moment, then called, “Do you still have your rope?”

“Yes!”

“Can you throw it up to me?”

“I can’t see you! I don’t know how far it is!”

“Well, try!”

“All right. Just a moment.”

After a brief silence, Ian heard a cry of, “Here it comes!” He lay on his belly and stared intently into the crevice, readying himself to try to catch the rope. But he saw nothing.

A moment later he heard a delvish curse.

“Try again!” he called down.

Rocky did try again, with no more success than the first time. He tried again, and again, and again. After what seemed hours, he shouted, “My arm is getting tired!”

“You’ll be more than tired if we can’t get you out of there,” replied Ian. “Keep trying!”

The delver continued his efforts. Several times Ian caught a hint of the rope snaking upward. More than once it came within inches of his

outstretched hand — close, but not close enough.

“I almost had it that time! Do it again!”

With a cry of despair, Rocky hurled the end of the rope upward once more. Leaning perilously far over the crevice, Ian snatched at it. “Got it!” he cried, and at once began to pull.

“Don’t!” shouted Rocky. “Don’t pull. Just hold it steady and let me climb.”

Ian slid back to a more solid position. The delver was light enough that Ian did not need to brace himself against anything. Wrapping his end of the rope twice around his forearm, he called, “All right, climb up!” Then he stared intently into the crevice, ready to stretch down a helping hand as soon as Rocky was close enough.

The delver had just reached a place where he was visible when Ian heard a sudden clamor from behind. He glanced over his shoulder, but could see nothing.

“Climb!” he hissed down to Rocky. “Climb! Something is coming, and it doesn’t sound good.”

“I’m moving as fast as I can!”

Ian looked over his shoulder once more, and his heart nearly froze. A horde of delvers was racing toward him.

“Rocky!” he called. “Rocky, there are delvers heading our way. A lot of them.”

“If they catch me all is lost!” cried the delver.

Ian could see his companion’s eyes now, staring up at him. He glanced over his shoulder again. The delvers, moving faster then he would have

thought possible, were appallingly close. From the sounds of their shouting, they were in no mood to parley.

Ian was relatively certain he was about to be captured. If Rocky were captured, too, he would not be able to go forward to find the delver he believed might know how to save Luster.

He had but an instant to make a decision.

“Can you make it out from where you are without the rope?” he called down.

“Yes, I think so!”

“Then grab some stone and hold on. Wait until the horde has passed. Then climb out and continue the mission!”

Dropping the rope, Ian turned to face the oncoming delver horde.

DAY FOUR OF THE INVASION

Change will come, whether we wish it to or not. To fight it is like fighting the sunrise. Better to say, “Ah, welcome old friend. Here you are again.”

– Edgecomb the Eccentric
Second Chronicle Keeper of Luster, Seventh Scroll

29

Still Hunted

Luster: The Slopes of Dark Mountain

Cara Dianna Hunter stood without moving, replaying over and over in her mind the moment when the Dimblethum had fled from her.

Why had the great creature rejected her offer to heal him?

She was so upset she had no idea how long she had stood watching after him, well past the point when he had vanished in the distance. Only when a rustling overhead alerted her that the Squijum was returning did she sigh and turn away.

“Yum!” he cried happily, leaping from a branch to land on her white shoulder. “Good bugs! Good Squijum!”

Though she was glad of his return, her reply was less than joyful. “Hello, Squijum.”

“Unicorn girl sad?” he asked, sounding sad himself, and reminding her how amazingly alert he was to her moods.

“Yes, I’m sad.”

“Why?”

“The Dimblethum was here. He was hurt, and I wanted to heal him, but he refused and ran away. Why would he do that, Squijum? Why wouldn’t he let me heal him?”

“Dimblethum crazy,” replied the Squijum, tugging at her mane. “Dimblethum always been crazy.”

“Thanks, that explains everything.”

“Squijum good explainer,” he replied contentedly.

They lingered by the tree for a while longer, Cara telling the Squijum she needed to rest. Though Cara *was* tired, her main reason for delaying was her hope that the Dimblethum might return. Finally, reluctantly, she abandoned the thought and they resumed their journey. But she had not gone more than a few feet when she halted. Her sense of the direction she must travel in order to join the great glory had changed. It took her a moment to work it out — directions had never been her specialty — but she finally decided they had moved eastward.

Uneasiness crept over her. Did this mean that her grandmother had led the unicorns out of Autumngrove? Why would she do that? Had some disaster struck? Were they even now fleeing the Hunters?

Whatever had happened, she wanted to join them. Her place was with the unicorns. So she started out again, the Squijum still clinging to her mane.

It was about midday when Cara heard the voices of men nearby. She froze in place, hoping desperately that if she didn’t move she would not attract their attention.

“What is it about this girl that’s so all-fired important, anyway?” asked one of them, his voice uncomfortably close.

“Beloved hasn’t seen fit to tell us,” replied another. “Though given the way the kid so completely disappeared, I’m guessing she must have some

kind of magic. Where can she have gotten to, anyway?"

"I know where I'd like to get to," said a third voice. "Away from this godforsaken mission and back to the main event. I didn't come here to hunt for Ian's whelp. I came to kill unicorns!"

"We'll hunt what Beloved tells us to hunt," snapped the first voice.

"Well, I can't promise what we'll find," replied the third voice, sounding surly. "These blood trackers Beloved gave us were fine in the beginning, but the stupid things seem to have stopped working altogether now."

Cara silently thanked Elihu for her transformation as the Hunters passed on, moving as silently as if they were unicorns themselves. That silence frightened her, making her realize she could not count on hearing a Hunter if he was nearby, not even with her unicorn ears.

But even worse than their silent passage was the conversation that preceded it, which made it plain that she was indeed the one they were seeking. Clearly, Elihu had been right about her being safer in unicorn form — a thought that made her wonder where he was now. Had the Hunters he was fighting captured him? Killed him?

She shuddered at the thought and continued down the mountainside. She did not always head in a downward direction to do so, since the sides of the mountain were rumpled; and even here in the forested section, there were rocky clefts through which she had to make her way, heading down one slope then up the opposite side. She was pleased to discover in doing this that her cloven hooves let her negotiate these places with a nimbleness she had not expected.

She wasn't sure how many miles she had covered when a sudden, sharp ache in her heart told her that another unicorn had been killed. Though her

vision was once more blurred by tears, she walked on.

The Squijum, riding on her back, patted her neck, as if again sensing her sorrow.

30

The Delver Horde

Luster: the Stone Highway

Ian’s mind raced as he watched the delver horde draw near. His first instinct was to flee, but despite their short legs, he was not at all sure he could outrun them. Besides, if they continued along this stony road they must eventually come upon Martha and the others. So even if he did flee, the only direction he would want to go would be parallel to the road so he could try to reach them first. It was unlikely he could do that and escape detection. Moreover, it was vital he divert the delvers from discovering Rocky, who still clung to the wall of the crevice. If his new companion’s search for his teacher really could lead to an end to the increasingly violent tremors ripping at Luster, he had to give Rocky that chance.

With all that in mind, Ian decided to walk toward the delvers. His original plan had been to enter Delvharken and speak to the King. Perhaps he could bluff it out here, instead.

The horde came to a halt several feet in front of him. Now that they were closer, Ian was appalled to see how many there were, standing so tightly packed that their hairless scalps made it look as if the road before him was paved with cobblestones. The hideous faces of the closest ones almost made

Ian reconsider his decision to stand rather than flee. But it was too late now to change his mind.

After a mumble of activity, five delvers stepped forward. Ian soon recognized the large delver in the center of the group as the King. Taking the initiative, he raised a hand in salute and said in delvish, “Greetings, Mighty Gnurflax. It is good to see you again.”

The King scowled at him for a moment, then cried, *“You!* What are you doing here, Hunter?”

“Returning to Delvharken, as I promised I would do after my first visit.”

The King’s scowl deepened. “That promise has long since passed the time when it should have been redeemed.”

“I would have been back sooner, but one of your own delvers pointed me in the wrong direction when I was in pursuit of the girl and her amulet. That detour cost a great deal of time.”

“The nameless *skwarmint* who did that has been punished!” shrieked Gnurflax, his face twisting with sudden rage. Just as quickly he caught his breath. After a moment he nodded. Staring at Ian shrewdly he said, “Do you have the amulet now?”

Ian spread his hands. “Alas, the delay had its effect. I lost track of the amulet.”

He saw at once that it was the wrong answer and his gut twisted as the King screeched, “Then you are no longer of any use to me!” Turning to the delvers beside him, Gnurflax cried, “Seize the human!”

Ian could see that to fight was useless. There were hundreds of them. Even if he managed to slay the first twenty — or even the first fifty — that came at him, they would eventually overwhelm him. The more havoc he

wrought now, the greater would be their wrath when he finally did fall to their attack. If he angered them too greatly, they might kill him on the spot. And his main goal, right now, was to stay alive in the hope that he might escape later and somehow find Cara and then rejoin Martha and the others.

So he stood his ground and let the delver horde take him. He had to use every trick he had learned during his training to keep himself calm as they bore him to the ground. Several then sat on him, to hold him in place, while others bound him hand and foot. Once they were satisfied that he was immobilized, they slid a pole between his hands and feet, then hoisted him as if he were a slain deer.

As Ian dangled helplessly, Gnurflax came to stand beside his head. Gazing at his captive with bulging eyes, the Delverking rubbed his chin and growled, “You may prove to be an excellent bargaining chip.”

Then he spat on the ground and turned away.

A moment later the horde started forward, the slap of their bare feet against the stone sounding like applause celebrating his capture.

It was only two or three yards before they came to the crevice where Rocky was hiding. The four delvers carrying the pole from which Ian dangled simply leaped over it. The jump took less than a heartbeat. But with his head tipped back, Ian could see Rocky staring up at him in terror. Then his carriers were on the far side of the crevice, trotting forward.

Ian had no way of telling if the delvers that followed caught sight of his last hope, or if Rocky remained free to continue his mission.

31

Return of a Friend

Luster: the Slopes of Dark Mountain

The forest on the lowest part of the mountain was dense, and Cara realized that without the clear guidance provided by her heart, she would be deathly afraid of being lost. Here in Luster there would be no road to eventually stumble across, no city, not even some small town that might surprise her. She had a new sense of the great wilderness of much of this world, and it was slightly terrifying.

By midafternoon she and the Squijum were off Dark Mountain and far enough from its clouds that the brightness of the day lifted her heart. They had entered an open area, a wide meadow bordered by a tumbling stream.

The Squijum had just flounced off to hunt for bugs when a winged shadow sliding over the ground caught Cara's attention. Looking up, she was delighted to see Medafil circling toward them. Yet despite her relief at seeing him, she also felt a sudden, strong impulse to flee.

Why do I want to run? she wondered as she forced herself to stand steady. *Medafil is a friend. Is it the unicorn in me that reacts this way?*

The final flutter of the gryphon's wings as he slowed his descent caused the meadow grass to bend around Cara's hooves.

“Unicorn!” he said, keeping his voice low. “Do you know the danger here? There are Hunters about!” Then he sighed and muttered, “Oh, drat. The flick-spickled creature probably can’t understand me.”

Cara realized that, unlike the Squijum, the gryphon had not realized who he was speaking to. “I know of the Hunters,” she replied in English. “I have been dodging them all day.”

Medafil started back. “How do you know that tongue?”

She hesitated, then said, “I studied it with a friend.”

Medafil nodded. “Well, in all that dodging you’ve been doing, did you by any chance see a human girl? She was in my care, but yesterday I lost her while fending off some Hunters. I have been seeking her ever since, but can find no sign of her.”

Cara hesitated. Should she reveal herself? Or would it be better to keep her true identity secret? Medafil was a trusted friend, so her hesitation didn’t come from fear. And it would be good to have someone to confide in when she was feeling so lost and uncertain. Yet something held her back. Shame? No, it was not that. Fear of his disapproval? To her surprise, that rang true. Yet it was not reason enough to avoid telling him.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head and said softly, “I am the one you seek, Medafil.”

“Gaaah! What kind of fig-dingled fool do you think I am?”

“You and I first met by a rock in the moonlight, when I freed you from a delver trap,” she said softly. “You went with me to Ebillan’s cave, and later we traveled together through delver caverns to reach the Valley of the Centaurs.”

The gryphon blinked in surprise, then asked slyly, “How was I injured on that journey?”

“We were fleeing the skwartz, and in the last moments you had to pass through a space that was too small, tearing your wing. We thought you might never fly again, but Belle healed you.”

“Gaaah! It is you! But what in the frim-dibbled, dat-splangled, frak-frumpussed world have you done to yourself? Even your voice has changed!”

Feeling safer with Medafil at her side, Cara took her time explaining all that had happened since she and Graumag had left him on the mountainside. When she was finished, the gryphon shook his wings as if he had felt a chill and said, “Cara, strangeness seems to follow you around like a lovesick boy. Who is this Elihu? What is his game? Where does he fit into all this?”

“I have no idea. Nor do I have much idea what I should do next, except try to rejoin the unicorns.”

“That will not be a safe place for you.”

“No place is safe for me now! But at least that will be the *right* place. I am part of the unicorns, Medafil. I must stand with them in their time of danger.”

The gryphon regarded her seriously. Finally, in tones more gentle than usual, he said, “Grim-bobble it, you may be dressed as a unicorn, but you are still just a child. You do not need to face this danger, Cara. I know places where you can hide until this is over.”

“If I hide, what would be left for me if the Hunters win? My people slain, I would be the last of my kind. And even then Beloved will hunt me. I cannot hide forever.”

She took a breath, then uttered the words she had not been willing to speak to anyone for some time now, not even to herself, for fear the truth of them would freeze her in her tracks and prevent her from doing what she must. “Medafil, I’m terrified. But being young didn’t save me from being pulled into this, and it doesn’t excuse me from doing my part now.” She hesitated, then added sadly, “The hard thing is, I don’t even know what my part is. I just know that I am woven into this in ways I cannot understand.”

The gryphon sighed. “It is no small burden to be a child of destiny, Cara. Well, what do you wish to do now?”

“Besides hide?” she asked with a laugh. “I must get back to the unicorns. Except even that has gotten complicated, because I thought they were at Autumngrove. But now I sense that they are moving.”

Medafil frowned. “I hope they are not fleeing in panic.”

“I don’t think they would do that. My grandmother is not the kind to panic. Nor is Moonheart, for that matter.”

“Sudden death can change things. You know I love your grandmother, Cara, but dank-fribble it, she is not ready for this. Nor are the unicorns. They’ve had this world as a haven so long that they are not hardened to the kind of challenge facing them now. I fear for them, each and every one.”

The words, unusually serious for the gryphon, made Cara nervous.

“You said you can sense them,” continued Medafil. “In which direction?”

When Cara pointed with her horn, Medafil said, “Had I not lost you, I would have been heading back to Autumngrove. But I hardly dared return to Amalia Flickerfoot with the news that I had misplaced her granddaughter. So I have been searching for you all this time. I will fly in

that direction now and see what I can learn. Will you wait here until I return?”

“Are you going to tell them what has happened to me?”

“Do you want me to hide it from them? And if so, how am I to explain why I have spoken with you, but returned without you?”

Cara thought about that for a moment. Because of the way she and her grandmother had lived, she had a tendency toward secrecy, toward keeping things to herself. But in truth, she could see no reason to hide this from her grandmother.

“No, you can tell them,” she said, feeling oddly uneasy even as she made the decision. “As to waiting here, I would prefer to continue moving toward them. In truth, I can still use some practice in this new body. I wouldn’t want to be too awkward when I join my kin.”

“Beware of vanity!” said Medafil in what Cara hoped were joking tones.

“I promise,” she said.

Medafil stretched his head forward, and she longed to stroke his feathered neck as she would have in the past. Except, of course, she had no hands. His voice low and urgent, he said, “Listen, unicorn girl. There is danger all about and I am uneasy at leaving you. Even so, I think it best for now. I wish I could carry you, but that is not possible given your new form. So here is my advice: You have the gift of tongues. If the Hunters catch you, tell them at once who you are. Otherwise, they will slay you without a second thought.”

“But if I do that they will take me to Beloved. Avoiding that was the whole point of turning into a unicorn to begin with.”

“Bib-dribble it, if they keep you alive and take you to Beloved, you have hope! If they slay you, all is finished.”

Remembering how her grandmother always said that if you were alive you had a chance, Cara swallowed hard and whispered, “Yes, I understand.”

“Good.” The gryphon turned, ran across the meadow, then leaped and stretched his wings. A few minutes later he was out of sight.

As Cara watched him go she heard a rustling in the grass. Glancing to her side, she cried, “Squijum! I’m glad you’re back.”

“Good Squijum always come back,” he crooned, hugging his fluffy tail.

“Yes,” she replied. “Good Squijum always come back.”

“Keep moving now?” he asked, leaping to her shoulder.

“Yes, keep moving,” she said.

She began trotting across the meadow, moving in the same direction Medafil had flown: toward her grandmother, toward the unicorns, who were themselves moving, she sensed, toward the place where the Hunt must finally end, whatever that end might be.

32

Shaken Loose

Luster: Delvharken

By the fifth day of M’Gama’s underground imprisonment, she was filled with deep frustration and an even deeper terror.

The reason for the frustration was simple: She continued — though only occasionally — to catch hints of the hidden power she had first felt when the delvers had chained her to the wall of this cave. She now had a sense of where that power was radiating from, or at least the general direction. But she still had no idea *who* it might be coming from, much less why it was only intermittently present.

The source of her terror was also simple: The tremors wracking the stone that surrounded her were growing both more frequent and more intense.

She feared for herself — how could she not, chained to a wall far underground with the very rocks shifting and shaking on all sides? But even more she feared for Luster and for every creature that inhabited this increasingly unstable world, whether aboveground or below.

The delvers had brought her food only once since she had been bound here. The Geomancer was not surprised. She had not anticipated the best of treatment, and she suspected that by now they were trapped in their own fear, leaving her as the least of their worries. As much as she disliked the

little monsters, she knew they were tied as closely to the stone and soil of Luster as she was.

That had been yesterday. At least, she thought it was a day ago. As she had been finishing the meal — it was revolting, but hunger could make eating almost anything possible — another tremor, the worst yet, made the walls around her bulge. From the distance, in sound carried by stone, which her magic made more intense, M'Gama had heard a terrified clamor. Puzzled, she had finally understood the sound to be that of a huge number of delvers crying out. At first she had thought they were cries of fear, but in time they turned to something far more chilling, shouts that sounded almost like triumph.

Then the cries had faded.

Now, a day later, the only disturbance came from the occasional grinding movement in the rock around her. M'Gama was slowly realizing that though Delvharken had seemed silent to her before, there had always been a low murmur of activity that she could sense. That was gone.

What had happened? Where were the delvers?

She blessed the fact that her chains let her reach the water that continued to collect in the small pool on her left. But for the first time, she began to wonder if she might die of starvation while imprisoned here.

Wouldn't that be a sorry end to a glorious career? she asked herself mockingly.

Though the Geomancer did not want to die, she refused to panic at the thought. That was not her way.

And then something happened that did cause her to panic, at least momentarily. The rock chamber shook and shifted more violently than at

any point so far. With a grinding rumble, the wall beside her split. A huge chunk of stone fell from the ceiling, missing her by inches. Other pieces of stone clattered around her, bouncing off her neck and shoulders. One large shard struck her arm and for a painful moment M'Gama feared the bone was broken. Before she could think about that, the tremor grew worse. With a deafening roar, half the chamber collapsed. The choking dust made it impossible to see. Coughing and gasping, expecting the rest of the chamber to fall in at any moment, the Geomancer prepared herself to die.

And then . . . silence. The shaking had stopped. At least, *the world* had stopped shaking. M'Gama discovered, to her disgust, that her own body was still trembling violently.

Stop it! she ordered herself. Then she pressed tight to the wall behind her, hoping to gather some calming strength from the rock. As she did, she heard a loud clank. She cried out in delight as she realized the metal ring to which the chain holding her arm was fastened had come loose from the wall and fallen to the floor.

With a sudden surge of hope, M'Gama kicked outward, pulling against her leg chain. It remained tight in the wall, and for a moment hope faded. But she gave another kick, and then another, and then a stubborn fourth, and at last was rewarded with a second delicious clanking sound.

She was free!

Yes, she was still underground, in the realm of the enemy, with the stone itself no longer to be depended on. Even so, she was free. Dragging her chains behind her like a ghost, the Geomancer crawled over the debris that clogged the mouth of the cave.

Common sense demanded she head for the surface as quickly as possible. She could find the right direction easily enough — she was the Geomancer, after all. But when she was about halfway up, something else, something even stronger, began to pull her in another direction.

Fighting instincts that screamed for her to flee the crumbling tunnels, M’Gama turned. Despite the danger, she was determined to find the strange power that had been calling to her, off and on, ever since she was first chained to the wall of Gnurflax’s dungeon.

33

Sky Talk

Luster: The Sky

Medafil had been flying in the direction Cara had pointed out to him for about an hour when he saw something moving through the air in his direction. “Prat-spakkle it,” he muttered to himself. “Can’t be alone even in the sky!”

Mentally preparing to take evasive action if necessary, the gryphon continued on his way.

It wasn’t much longer before his sharp eyes identified the approaching figure as that of a dragon. Within another few minutes he saw that it was, as he had hoped, Graumag. “And thank the poot-doodled powers it’s not Ebillan,” he murmured.

The two creatures continued toward each other. When they were within hailing distance Graumag called, “Greetings, Air Brother!”

“Greetings, Sky Sister!” replied Medafil. “It is good to see you again.” He actually meant this, mostly.

“And good to see you. However the truth is I would be even happier to see young Cara. I was separated from her and have not been able to find her.”

“I have found her,” replied Medafil proudly. “In fact, I am on the way to tell her grandmother that she is well.”

The gryphon wondered, briefly, if he should inform the dragon of Cara’s transformation, but decided that since she had not authorized him to tell anyone but her grandmother he would not mention it.

“I have but recently come from the Queen,” replied Graumag. “The Gathered Glory is on the move.”

“I have been told that this is so,” replied Medafil.

Having come close enough for easy conversation, the dragon and the gryphon began to circle each other, as neither was built to hover.

“Who told you this?” asked Graumag.

The gryphon cursed himself for being a loose-beaked fool. Finally he said, vaguely, “I met a unicorn.”

He was flapping hard to keep up with Graumag.

“And did this unicorn say where they were going?” asked Graumag.

“It did not.”

“They are heading for the Axis Mundi. I am flying now to deliver a challenge to Beloved to meet the unicorns for a final battle.”

Medafil was so startled he momentarily forgot to flap. “Gaaaah!” he cried, dropping several yards. “You can’t be serious.”

“Serious as death,” replied Graumag. “Which seems to me is the inevitable outcome, though how many deaths, and whose, it is hard to say.”

For a time Medafil flew in silence alongside the dragon. At last he said, “I think that rather than going to the unicorns, I should return to Cara to tell her which direction they are moving. I know she wants to join them.”

“I consider that foolishness on her part, but I would guess that you are correct,” replied the dragon.

“Good luck in your mission, Sky Sister.”

“Give my greetings to Cara, Air Brother.”

“I will,” promised the gryphon.

And with that, the two great creatures parted, Graumag to carry her message to Beloved, Medafil reversing course to return to Cara.

34

The Chronicle Keeper

Luster: Grimwold's Cavern

Aside from the horrifying tremors that began on Blood Moon night and had been slowly escalating ever since, Grimwold had had an uneventful journey from the Valley of the Centaurs back to his underground quarters at the great library known as the Unicorn Chronicles. After the arduous trip, the old dwarf took great pleasure in being once more in the caves that he called home and ran his fingers along the wood-paneled walls, as if savoring the very feel of them.

He did not rest long, though. Within a few hours of his return he went to the Story Room, where he took out paper, ink, and quill. He had an enormous amount to record, considering all that had happened during their travels to the valley. “Crusty inkwells!” he muttered to himself, using one of his favorite expletives. “I hate it when I end up being part of the story!” He much preferred simply waiting in his caves for the unicorns to come to him with tales of their adventures.

He was in his second day of writing, and deeply absorbed in recording the tale the Chiron had told about the birth of the Whisperer, when a bell rang, informing him that the Queen wished to speak with him.

“Drat,” he muttered. “Can’t a fellow ever be left alone to do his work?”

But a summons from the Queen was not something to be ignored, especially since, as Chronicle Keeper, he was a pledged servant and also enjoyed a nice living. So he left his work and made his way to the place in his complex of caves where the scrying pool was always ready to reveal the Queen’s messages.

Unlike many of the caves in his home, this one had been left in its natural form. Three small cauldrons, each suspended from a tripod, lit the cave with a soft orange glow. Centered amidst the tripods was a stone basin. Usually the water it held was dark and cold looking, but now, with a message coming in, it, too, emitted a soft glow.

After the surprises and shocks of his recent journey, Grimwold did not think he could be startled by whatever this message might be. Yet when he went to the edge of the basin and saw that the image in the water was not a messenger, but Amalia Flickerfoot herself, he felt a shiver of apprehension.

Of course, it was a bit of a surprise simply to see Amalia in her true form, since he had known her for so long as Ivy Morris. She was heartbreakingly beautiful. The unicorns all were, of course, though Grimwold would never tell them that. But Amalia was more so than most, a quiet beauty made more real and solid by the strange life she had led.

“Greetings, old friend,” she said.

“Greetings, My Queen.”

“I must be brief. In two days' time, the Gathered Glory will meet Beloved for a final battle at the field northeast of the Axis Mundi. As you are the Keeper of the Chronicles, it would be good if you could be there to observe, whether it be our downfall or the beginning of our true freedom.” She

turned her head slightly and — was he imagining it? — winked at him before adding, “By the way, you might want to bring some friends.”

He stared at her in astonishment. Before he could think of any reasonable response, she said, “That’s all for now.” At once the pool rippled and her image disappeared.

Grimwold blinked. What in the world was she thinking of? What did she mean by “You might want to bring some friends”? He didn’t even have any friends. And had she really winked at him?

Then he remembered that the last time he had tried to communicate with the Queen of the unicorns through this pool — it had been the old Queen, Arabella Skydancer — the message had been intercepted by Beloved. Did Amalia know about that? Was she tipping her hand, or playing some mysterious game of her own?

Whatever the answer, Grimwold’s duty was now clear. The coming battle was the most significant thing to happen in Luster since he became Chronicle Keeper, and it was important for him to be there.

Returning to his living quarters, the old dwarf packed ink, paper, and quills, as well as a couple of spare robes, some waybread, and a packet of dried mushrooms. He had nearly finished this task when he suddenly stopped working and stood bolt upright.

“Oh, no,” he said. “No, she wouldn’t ask me to do that.”

But now that the idea had come to him, he knew he was right and who the “friends” the Queen had been referring to must be.

Shaking his head in disgust, he got out a stack of maps and studied them until he was confident he had spotted the most likely location to connect

with the Queen's "friends." Happily, it was not too far out of his way. Shouldering his pack, he set off.

He would have preferred to travel underground, but given the worsening tremors that no longer seemed safe. Before he closed the door to his subterranean realm, he took one last, loving look back. "I hope you'll still be here when I return," he whispered to his home. Then, feeling foolishly sentimental, he closed the door and set out on the Queen's mission.

35

News From the Queen

Luster: the Wilderness

Cara and the Squijum were crossing a wide grassland when they heard a familiar squawk from above. A moment later Medafil glided down in front of them.

“Back already?” asked Cara.

The gryphon ruffled his feathers. “Well, I like that! No ‘Glad to see you, Medafil.’ No ‘My, you performed your mission with amazing speed, Medafil.’ Just, ‘What are you doing back already?’ Hmmph. If I wanted to be insulted I could have stayed at home with the other gryphons.”

He sniffed and turned away.

“Don’t sulk,” said Cara. “I didn’t mean it that way! I was just pleasantly surprised you made it back so quickly.” She hesitated, then asked, “Did you tell my grandmother of my transformation?”

“Gaaah! Um, no. I didn’t actually make it all the way to the unicorns. I came upon Graumag along the way. She told me that your grandmother has issued a challenge to Beloved, asking for a single great battle. According to Graumag, Amalia says this is no longer a Hunt, it’s a war.”

Cara actually felt her knees weaken at this statement. She took a deep breath, then said, "This is terrifying. But I think it is also incredible. It could be the end of everything for us, but it is the only way."

"I am not so certain of that," said Medafil. "Even so, I thought it best to bring you this information as quickly as possible."

"For that, I thank you," said Cara, who was also feeling a bit of relief that her secret had not been delivered.

"The final confrontation is to be near the great tree. I felt you should know where the Gathered Glory is headed, since if you want to connect with them sooner you should alter your path."

Cara tilted her head, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"If you keep following your sense of where they are at any given moment you'll reach them eventually, but do it by making a long curve. Turn to the southeast. You'll shorten your route a good deal by cutting directly toward the place they are heading."

"But how will I know I'm going in the right direction? Right now I'm following my sense of where they are. It's the only guide I have. I wouldn't know how to find my way to the center on my own. It's not as if I have a compass."

"Dimblethum's cave near big tree," said the Squijum. "Squijum know where. Squijum find way."

"Well, it's good to know that drak-splattled little beast is good for something," said Medafil. He paused, then said softly, "Are you all right, Cara?"

"As well as can be expected." She thought for a moment, then said, "What are you going to do now, Medafil?"

“I plan to rejoin your grandmother. You don’t think I would let the Wanderer go into this without me at her side, do you?”

“Of course not! I know you are a good and faithful friend.”

Medafil ruffled his feathers. “I should say so. But I also thought it might be well for me to travel with you. I can’t fly you now, of course. But it doesn’t feel right to leave you alone. So we can walk together, if that’s all right with you. It will take a bit longer, but I’ll still end up in the same place.”

Cara had been hoping for this, but had feared to ask it. “Thank you,” she said. “Your company would be most welcome.”

“Move, move!” cried the Squijum. “Let’s move, unicorn girl!”

Cara laughed. “You’re right. Except I don’t know the way so you’ll have to be the guide now.”

“This way!” he cried, leaping down and scampering ahead of her. “This way to Dimblethum’s cave!”

Cara wondered, with both hope and some apprehension, if there were any chance the Dimblethum might be there.

Though Cara was grateful for Medafil's company, she found it difficult to follow the gryphon’s advice to not move directly toward the unicorns, for her sense of them had become overpowering, and her heart longed to join them. Even so, she forced herself to heed the gryphon’s words, and as the afternoon wore on she could tell that the glory’s position was indeed shifting, just as the gryphon had said would happen. After that, she was glad to let the Squijum guide their path.

For most of the day, the sun was warm above them, the air so still it was as if the world was holding its breath, waiting for something. Twice more the ground shook beneath them, nearly knocking Cara off her feet. The third tremor, early in the evening, did send her sprawling. Medafil took to the air. The Squijum, who had been clinging to her mane, slapped the ground and shrieked, “Hotcha silly world! Hold still!”

“Frik-doobled earthquakes,” muttered the gryphon, once the ground had settled and he had landed again.

An hour or so later Cara sensed something new, something that called to her with an amazing power. It took her a moment to realize that it was a girl, a human girl such as she had been just a short time ago. She found she had to steel her heart against that call. Resisting the urge to seek the girl took more effort than she would have guessed. No wonder the unicorns were so vulnerable to the traps the Hunters placed for them!

Another time Cara thought she saw the Dimblethum in the distance. But when she called out, the shaggy form turned and ran. She was hurt at first, but then remembered that, other than Lightfoot, the Dimblethum really did not care for unicorns. Besides, maybe it hadn’t been him. Who knew what other creatures prowled the wilds of Luster?

“Hotcha gotcha not far now!” cried the Squijum, who had been riding on Cara’s neck without taking a break to hunt for food for some hours. Cara was still astonished at how much territory she had been able to cover.

Not that I know how many miles it actually was, she thought. *But I could never have traveled so long without stopping when I was human.*

It had taken her a while to trust the Squijum to be her guide. Still, she was glad to have him. The forest was so vast and unmarked that it would have been easy to fall into raw panic had she not had the Squijum and the gryphon traveling with her. Silly as they might sometimes seem, without their company the overwhelming wilderness would have been crushing to her.

They had just crossed a stream, its water clear and sparkling, when the Squijum gripped her mane with sudden tightness. Before she could complain, he hissed, “Shhhhh, unicorn girl! *Shhhhh!”*

It was so unusual for the Squijum to be the one to caution silence that Cara felt a quick shiver of fright. “What is it?” she whispered.

“Listen!” he replied in the softest voice she had ever heard him use.

36

Talking to the Enemy

Luster: Beloved's Encampment

Graumag loved to fly. It was her greatest joy in a life that had otherwise been marked by loss and tragedy. As she soared through the skies above Luster she could not help but think how intensely she cared for this world that had accepted her when she was most in need of succor. Gazing down at its rolling hills and silvery-blue forests, its clear lakes and towering mountains, the thought of losing it pierced her with a sorrow more profound than she could have imagined.

To her surprise, she found herself weeping — fiery tears that would have scorched the grass had they not had time to cool in their long fall to the ground. She had a fearful sense that the unicorns had not yet grasped how great was their peril, didn’t yet realize that even if they defeated Beloved and her troops, the whole of Luster was tottering at the edge of doom.

And how could they, really? That the very world they had lived in for these many centuries might actually fall apart was almost beyond imagination.

Immersed in these thoughts, Graumag had lost track of how long she had been flying when she spotted the Axis Mundi. Though she had seen the

great tree many times, its gargantuan size never ceased to astonish her. It reared above the forest that grew beyond its surrounding meadow, tall though those trees were, like a giant among pygmies.

With her predator's eyes, sharper by far than a mere hawk's, it was not hard to spot Beloved's encampment, which consisted of a small village of tents, as well as two wooden watchtowers. It lay a good half mile from the Axis Mundi — Graumag still had a keen feel for distance from her centuries on Earth, where such measurements mattered more than they did here in Luster. Another three meadows of equal size lay the same distance from the tree. Equally spaced, they formed the corners of a large square.

As Graumag drew closer to Beloved's encampment, she found herself hoping, again, that Hunters did not feel about dragons as they did about unicorns. Her earlier battle with that group on the mountain had been all about trying to hold them off while Cara and Elihu escaped. She didn't know whether they would have fought her so fiercely otherwise.

She felt her vulnerability acutely. Though she was well armored, it would not be impossible for an arrow that found the right spot in her throat to do her in. Her wings, too, were at risk; while the leathery membranes that stretched between the bone structure did not feel much pain, a sufficient number of arrows tearing through them could bring her plummeting down.

She reviewed the details of the challenge Amalia had requested her to deliver. As she did, she wondered if the Queen had really understood the risk she was asking her friend to undertake. But then, under the circumstances, perhaps all risks were considered reasonable.

Graumag noticed that some of the men had now spotted her. Standing in the open, they had gathered in a knot and were gazing up. She saw no

weapons yet, but she would have to be careful.

Men continued to join the group, many of the newcomers clutching bows or spears. Then, from a brightly colored tent much larger than the others that filled the camp, there emerged a woman who could only be Beloved. Knowing that this was the person who had brought such trouble on Luster, Graumag felt an urge to swoop down and simply eat the woman. Except the dragon was fairly certain she would be dead before she could get anywhere near Beloved.

When Graumag had accepted Amalia's request to deliver this challenge, she hadn't fully considered how tricky the process might be. She was still trying to figure out the best way to open negotiations when Beloved stepped to the front of the group and cupped her hands to her mouth. Graumag gazed down in surprise. Did the silly woman really think she could be heard from that far away? But a moment later, and much to the dragon's surprise, Beloved spoke so clearly it was as if she were standing right next to her ear.

"Dragon! Why have you come to our encampment?"

"How are you able to speak to me?" replied Graumag. "And can you hear me now?"

"Don't be foolish! Of course I can hear you. And the how is of no importance. It's a minor magic, that's all. The question stands: Why have you come here?"

"I bring a message from the unicorns. May I land in safety to deliver it?"

"I see no reason why you should not repeat it from exactly where you are."

Having expected all this time to have a parley on the ground, Graumag was startled to realize there was, indeed, no reason not to continue speaking

exactly as they were. “All right, here is the message: Amalia Flickerfoot, Queen of the Unicorns, asks if you and your Hunters have the courage to meet the unicorns on field of battle, where all shall finally be decided.”

“When and where?”

“Two days hence, at noon, in the great meadow northeast of the tree where you entered.”

“Tell the Queen that if she is fool enough to face us directly, we welcome the challenge.”

That was all Graumag needed to hear. “I will deliver the message,” she said. Then she banked in a graceful arc and headed back toward the Gathered Glory.

37

Silverhoof

Luster: the Wilderness

Cara held still as stone, then slowly swiveled her ears — another trick that had not been possible in her human form. After a moment she heard what the Squijum had heard. It was a man, singing.

She wondered, briefly, whether the Squijum's ears were even more sensitive than hers, or if she simply hadn't learned to listen well enough yet.

"I hear it, too," murmured Medafil.

For the next several minutes, unicorn, gryphon, and Squijum remained silent and waiting, so still they might have been carved from stone. Soon it became obvious that the singer was moving in their direction. Was he a Hunter? Cara hesitated, uncertain whether to flee, but in doing so possibly draw attention to herself, or to hold still, hoping that the path of whoever she was hearing would not bring him close enough to spot them.

As the voice drew nearer, she realized it was one of uncommon beauty. She realized, too, that the haunting words of the man's song were unlike anything that would come from a Hunter:

Beautiful creatures of fire and light,

Shimmer like moonbeams cascading through night,
Crafted from starshine, fire, and air,
The Hunt has awoken, beware, friends, beware!

Cara felt a strong desire to move toward the singer, so she could see the owner of this beautiful voice.

Don't be ridiculous! she chided herself. *Just because a man can sing like an angel doesn't mean he's not also ready to drive a spear through your heart.*

But in another moment she recognized the voice and relaxed a bit. It was Elihu! With a sigh of relief, she started toward the singer.

"What are you doing?" whispered Medafil, clearly alarmed.

"It's all right," she said. "I know him."

She moved silently, not out of fear, but simply because she was a unicorn and silence came naturally to her. Soon enough she saw the flash of the man's golden hair through the leaves. A little closer and she could see that he was now fully dressed. A little closer and, despite her silence, he sensed her presence and turned.

Cara gasped. The singer was not Elihu after all, though he looked enough like him to be his brother. She stood, trembling, trying to decide whether to run.

The man lifted his hands and moved them away from his body. When Cara continued to tremble, he unstrapped the scabbard at his waist and let his sword fall to the ground. In a voice so much like Elihu's that it both confused and comforted her, he said softly, "It's all right, unicorn, I won't

hurt you. Nor you, gryphon," he added, nodding toward Medafil who stood slightly behind her.

"Turn around," she said. "I want to make sure you don't have any weapons at your back."

He looked startled to hear her speak, but did as she asked, still holding his hands out at his sides. When he had gone full circle he asked gently, "Satisfied?"

"Who are you?" she replied, not really answering his question.

"I am called Fallon."

"And what are you doing in Luster?" demanded Medafil.

Fallon did not seem surprised to hear the gryphon speak, causing Cara to wonder how much experience he might have had with legendary beasts. Without hesitation, he said, "I seek a friend. His name is Elihu."

Now Cara did relax a bit. "I've met Elihu."

"Do you know where he is now?"

The eagerness in the man's eyes was so like a hunger it frightened her.

"It was early yesterday," she stammered. "He . . . he did me a favor. Then he sort of . . . disappeared."

Fallon's disappointment showed only in his eyes. "Do you mean he vanished?" he asked, as if he considered fading into thin air a perfectly likely action.

Cara shook her head. "No. While I . . . slept, he slipped away. Or something. I don't know why. He was nearby when I went to sleep, but gone when I awoke."

Fallon rubbed his hands over his face in a weary gesture. "What was the favor he did you?"

“I’d rather not say.”

“As you wish.” He looked at her more closely. “I didn’t expect you to be able to speak to me. At least, not without first establishing some sort of connection.”

Cara cursed herself for behaving in a way so clearly unlike a unicorn. To recover, she asked quickly, challengingly, “How do you know about that?”

“You’re not the first unicorn I’ve met.”

Trying to keep her voice from trembling, hoping against hope, reminding herself that there were hundreds and hundreds of unicorns, Cara said, “What was this other unicorn’s name?”

“He called himself Lightfoot.”

A sob of relief burst from her throat.

“I take it you know him,” said Fallon.

“He’s . . . a dear friend. The last time I saw him he was in great danger. I can’t tell you how happy I am to learn that he survived. Do you know where he is now?”

“I left him the day before yesterday.” The man took a breath, as if he were about to say more, then stopped.

At first Cara was annoyed. Then she remembered that she, too, was not about to tell all she knew to someone she had just met. And she couldn’t just go galloping off in search of Lightfoot right now, anyway. But simply knowing he was alive lifted her heart, as if she had suddenly shed a dark and horrible weight she had been carrying ever since that dreadful moment when she had seen the Prince swarmed by delvers.

“You still haven’t explained why you can speak to me in human tongue,” said the man.

“It’s a gift from a dragon.”

“Well, *that’s* interesting,” he murmured, speaking as much to himself as to her. He straightened his shoulders, and she realized again how amazingly tall he was. “Look . . . uh, you didn’t tell me your name yet. Can you do that? I mean, I understand about magic and names, so I’m not asking for your truest name. But what do other unicorns call you?”

The question brought the reality of her situation back to her. She didn’t have a unicorn name yet! Before she could answer — and before her pause became too suspicious — Medafil said, “Silverhoof. They call her Silverhoof.”

She breathed an inward sigh of relief. She would have to remember to thank him for that.

“All right, Silverhoof”— she could tell by Fallon’s voice that he knew this wasn’t really her name — “it seems likely to me that we’re on the same side of things here. So just in case, let me give you some information. Are you aware that a woman named Beloved has opened a door from Earth into this world?”

“Yes, I know.”

“And are you aware that she has brought a small army of men called Hunters with her and that their goal is to kill the unicorns, every last one of them?”

Cara nodded.

“All right, I just wanted to be sure you knew. Now, having freely given you that information, may I ask a question?”

“You can ask,” she said cautiously.

“Good. I know about gryphons. But what in the name of all the stars above is that thing clinging to your neck?”

Cara laughed. “He’s called the Squijum.”

From behind she heard, “Good Squijum! Squijum hotcha good critter!”

A look of surprise passed over Fallon’s face, but vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared. Cara decided it must have been caused by hearing the Squijum talk. Of course, the man couldn’t have understood the little creature.

Or could he?

She looked at him with new puzzlement.

“Another question,” he said, his voice intent and serious. “One far closer to my heart. You say you met Elihu and he slipped away. Do you have even the slightest idea where he might have gone?”

Again, she was startled at the note of desperation in the big man’s voice and sorry that she had to shake her head no.

Fallon sighed. “Can you at least tell me where this happened?”

“We were on the slopes of Dark Mountain. I can’t tell you the exact direction, because I’ve been —” Again she hesitated, not wanting to reveal that she had been following her sense of the unicorns. She wasn’t ready to trust him that much yet.

“You’ve been what?”

She shook her head and said simply, “I haven’t been moving in a straight line.”

“Where are you going now?”

Medafil made a warning sound, and she paused before answering. She wanted to trust the man, indeed felt that she could trust him. But she knew

far too much about betrayal to do that easily. She was surprised to realize she was also resisting because he was so beautiful that he seemed too easy to trust, as if his beauty itself was a kind of trap.

He smiled into her silence. “Why should you tell me that, eh? Is that what you’re wondering? No reason, and I’m sorry I asked.” He paused, then said, “If I tell you something about what I’m up to myself perhaps you’ll feel more comfortable. Unless you’re in a terrible hurry?”

“We do need to keep traveling.”

“May I walk with you? I don’t have a specific direction, and you’re the closest thing to a clue to Elihu’s whereabouts that I have.”

“Frim-dangle it,” muttered Medafil, which Cara knew meant that the gryphon disapproved. Even so, she once again found herself wanting to trust this man. She recognized that the feeling was a weird tangle of wanting human company, of welcoming another guardian as they traveled through this wilderness, and also of desire, since her girl’s heart, trapped in her unicorn body, was longing toward Fallon’s beauty.

Stop it, she told herself fiercely. *Don’t feel, think!*

But in the end, it was feelings that guided her, since she had nothing else to go on.

“Yes,” she said softly. “Please walk with me.”

“I’m going to pick up my sword. Are you all right with that?”

Ignoring Medafil’s soft growl, she said, “You’re not a Hunter. You wouldn’t have waited this long to try to kill me if you were.”

He smiled ruefully and retrieved his sword. As he was buckling it on, the ground rippled beneath them.

“Yikes!” cried the Squijum, clutching Cara’s mane. She staggered, but didn’t fall. She saw Fallon do the same.

When the quake had passed, he said grimly, “We don’t have much time.”

“Before what?”

He studied her for a long moment, as if somehow testing her. Finally he said, “Before this world falls apart.”

Cara nodded, unhappy to have this confirmation of Graumag’s dire prediction. But she was also surprised that this stranger would understand the peril Luster was in. “Why do you believe that?” she asked.

“Let’s walk. While we travel, I will tell you a story. Part of it will be what I know. Part of it will be guesswork. But all of it, I promise, will come straight from my heart.”

38

Found, Yet Still Lost

Luster: the Stone Highway

Rocky clung to the wall of the crevice while the delver horde passed overhead, each delver crying out as he or she made the leap. He was terrified that they would spot him . . . and even more terrified that the world might shift again before he could climb out, moving the rock wall back into place and crushing him as it did.

He pressed himself against the stone, trying to make himself invisible while he prayed to the Great One that the delvers would not look down and that the world would hold its peace.

It had been agonizing not to be able to help Ian, but against those overwhelming numbers there was nothing he could have done. And given his current status with Gnurflax, the only result of trying would have been his own capture, which would not do any of them any good. Right now the main thing was that he try to find Namza.

He waited until the sound of the horde had passed, then climbed the remaining distance, about twice his own height, back to the highway. He gazed in the direction they had carried Ian, unable to forget the heartrending look on the man’s face as his bearers had leaped across the crevice with him dangling from that pole. Rocky hoped his own cove would hear the horde

coming in time to get off the highway and avoid capture. He felt a flash of guilt for having called his cousins from their newly assigned coves, knowing they would now all be marked as deserters.

He glanced up. The sky was gray with the coming dawn. He wondered if the horde would continue to travel once the sun had risen or if they would seek shelter against the wretched light.

Though it was troubling to see what appeared to be the entire population of Delvharken out in the open, it was not hard to guess why they had swarmed to the surface: Given the near-constant shaking of the world, their underground home, so solid for so long, must have suddenly seemed unsafe. But where were they heading? Did they have a plan, or was it mindless flight?

With a sigh, Rocky turned and continued his own journey, back toward the world his people had just fled.

Many paths led from the surface world to Delvharken. Most were small tunnels, easily hidden and accessible only to delvers. The main entrance was different. It was sealed with a pair of stone doors, crafted so carefully as to be all but invisible to an unpracticed eye. Yet to one who knew their secret, they opened easily to reveal a beautifully carved tunnel, broad enough for four large humans to walk abreast.

As Rocky approached he felt a pang. Knowing the secret to opening the doors was no longer necessary. They gaped wide, half torn from their frames. He passed through them boldly, expecting no challenge and finding none. What he *did* want to find was a sense of his old teacher.

He followed the tunnel downward, his heart aching as he climbed over the rubble of collapsed ceilings and shattered walls, astonished at the destruction of what he had thought indestructible.

Finally he came to the great chamber of the throne room. Here, too, the doors had been left wide open. He entered, chilled to see the vast space empty, the floor littered with the shards of fallen stalactites. Among these shards lay the bodies of delvers who had been killed by the falling stone.

Standing still, Rocky closed his eyes and opened his heart, hoping to catch a sense of his old teacher.

Nothing.

Namza, where are you? he thought desperately.

No answer.

He went to the Stone Throne. Feeling more rebellious than ever, he climbed into the raised seat and looked out on the empty hall, imagining it filled with delvers.

Stop! he ordered himself, shaking his head. *Concentrate!*

Closing his eyes once more, he tried to still all thoughts, all fears. Another tremor shook the hall, and he could hear the crash of a falling stalactite as it shattered on the cavern floor. When the disturbance was over, he took several calming breaths, as Namza had taught him, and tried to regain his focus.

After a time Rocky had cleared everything from his mind but thoughts of his old teacher — memories of how Namza had chosen him; memories of the wizard’s aged face and bent body; memories of his lessons, his occasional flashes of anger, but also of his unexpected gentleness; memories of how he had slowly, cautiously begun to speak of his concerns

about the King and his sanity, and of how the delvers might someday be different, more peaceful of heart.

And as Rocky thought these things slowly — so slowly he had no idea when it had actually begun — the sense of Namza began to creep into his brain. It was slight, and odd, as if something had changed. Yet it was definitely real.

Rising from the throne, scarcely breathing lest he lose the connection, Rocky descended to the cavern floor. He circled behind the throne. Led by the sense of his teacher, he entered a tunnel he had not known existed.

As he walked, his sense of Namza grew stronger, though still oddly muffled. That sense drew him on to the king's quarters, which was forbidden territory for a mere delver such as himself. But he was long past caring about such things. The thread of connection he was following led him through the chamber, down a narrow tunnel. The connection grew stronger with each step. Yet he still felt that troubling sense of it being muted by some barrier.

And then something even more troubling: His sense of Namza's presence began to diminish, as if he had somehow passed his teacher. But how could that be? Even if Namza were unconscious, he would still have seen him.

Rocky turned and walked back in the other direction. His sense of Namza grew stronger and then, again, began to diminish.

Frustrated, he turned back once more.

And then he spotted it: a shelf of stone at the base of the tunnel wall, just outside the opening to a chamber. With a cry of horror he raced to the stone and flung himself against it.

“Teacher!” he cried. “Teacher, it is I, your student! Oh, can you hear me? Can you feel me? I need you. Delvharken needs you. Doom is falling, and I don’t know what to do!”

From the stone to which he clung came no answer.

But the stone surrounding them shivered once more, opening new cracks in the tunnel walls, as if to mock his pleas for help.

39

"A World of His Own"

Luster: The Wilderness

Though Cara was eager for Fallon to speak, she did not press him. So the four of them — she, Fallon, Medafil, and the Squijum — walked for two or three miles before he finally said, “This story begins several thousand of what you call years ago, back when Elihu and I were fairly young.”

Before coming to Luster, Cara would have found such a statement absurd. Now she managed to take it in stride, saying only, “That’s an awfully long time.”

“There are levels of existence,” the big man continued. “Levels of power. Elihu and I were of the Great Powers, and lived in a place that you might call Paradise. But even there, things are much as they are among humans.”

“What do you mean?”

Fallon sighed. “I mean that even in that exalted realm, pride, anger, jealousy, desire, and ambition all exist. A little more controlled, perhaps, a little more refined. But ever ready to erupt . . . and to disrupt, for these things are always disruptive when they arise. Fortunately, as in the human world, there is love to temper matters.

“Now, Elihu and I were alike in many ways, especially in that we were both possessed of a powerful desire to create. However, his urge in that regard far surpassed anything I felt. The problem for Elihu was that there are limits on what is allowed to beings of our level. He, alas, refused to recognize those limits and insisted on experimenting, playing, pushing forward with the project that engaged his deepest passion.”

Fallon lapsed into silence. They walked on for a time, the only sound that of the silvery-blue leaves rustling about their feet. When Cara could stand it no longer she asked, “What was this project?”

Fallon shook his head, causing his burnished hair to shimmer over his shoulders almost like a unicorn’s mane. “He wanted to make a world of his own.”

Medafil squawked. Cara stopped cold, causing the Squijum to chitter at her in vexation. *“What?”*

“Elihu wanted to make a world.” Seeing her reaction, he added quickly, “Oh, that desire is hardly unheard of. But to actually do so is a privilege reserved to powers of a level far greater than mine and Elihu’s. It is, in a word, forbidden. This chafed at Elihu, who did not believe in such limitations — who, in fact, considered them a kind of tyranny. When he urged me to join him in his experiments, I refused — out of wisdom, I claimed, though I sometimes wonder if it was simply out of fear.

“Anyway, one day Elihu came to me and said, *‘Alahim’* —”

“Alahim?” asked Cara. Before Fallon could respond she realized that though the word was not of any language known on either Earth or Luster, her gift of tongues had supplied the meaning, anyway. “Ah, it’s a special kind of friend, right?”

Fallon smiled. “Your ability with language is indeed impressive, Silverhoof. ‘Heart-brother’ might be the closest translation. It is the greatest kind of friendship, a bond of love and affection that requires no explanation, no promises, no forgiveness, though those things may all be freely given and often are. Having an alahim is like having another self, even if your goals and dreams are not all the same. And Elihu’s dreams were certainly not the same as mine. So the pride in his voice when he said *‘Alahim,* I want you to come see what I have done,’ made me nervous.”

“Why?”

Fallon sighed. “I suspected — correctly — that he had succeeded in doing that which he should not.”

Medafil muttered something to himself. Cara shook her head. The idea was too bizarre to settle in easily. “He really made a world?” she asked at last.

Fallon considered, then said, “Perhaps I should say that he had created the *beginnings* of a world. He led me to a place of emptiness. Floating within it was something like an island. Rising from the center of that ‘island’ was a small tree, which I knew at once must be an Axis Mundi.

“‘Where did you get the seed?’ I asked.

“‘I stole it,’ he replied without a shred of remorse.

“‘And the blood to quicken it?’

“‘My own.’ ”

Fallon shuddered at the memory. “It is hard to explain to you the nature of this crime, Silverhoof,” he said grimly. “I will only tell you that my heart grew cold with fear at what would happen should it be discovered. Elihu was too enraptured with what he had done to share my dread. ‘It is not

much now,' he said. 'But it will grow, *alahim.* As the tree's roots spread, my world will spread with it, growing bigger and bigger, until it is a true world all its own. My world!'

"I stared at him in horror. *'Alahim,'* I whispered, 'the Higher Powers will surely punish you for this.'

"'Not if they don't find out,' he replied, knowing that he had bound me to secrecy.

"I was furious, for he had put me in an impossible situation. He knew I would not breathe a word of his secret; no *alahim* would do that. But he also knew that if what he had done was discovered — and, further, if it was discovered that I had known and had said nothing — there would be severe punishment for both of us."

"Was it discovered?" asked Medafil.

"Naturally."

"And what was the punishment?" asked Cara.

"The first punishment was to separate us. This was like tearing a heart in two, for *alahim* are meant to be together. What made this worse — far worse — was that I had already separated us, for I had not spoken to Elihu from the day he showed me what he had done."

Fallon sighed again, then said, "We both knew my wrath would cool in time and we would be together again. What we did not know was that Elihu's rebellious act would be discovered *before* we could reaffirm our bond — which meant our last words to each other were spoken in anger, not love. Before we could heal the wound, I was sent to live on a lower plane of existence."

After a long silence, Cara asked, "What do you mean?"

Fallon smiled ruefully. “I was plucked from Paradise and exiled to Earth.”

Deciding she didn’t want to think about the idea of Earth being a “lower plane of existence,” Cara said, “And what did they do to Elihu?”

“Of that I am not certain. In fact, that was part of our punishment — that neither of us would know what had been done to the other.

“Now, though no word was spoken by my judges, I knew that the only way for me to return to Paradise would be to do enough good in the world to earn my way back. I have spent millennia trying to do exactly that. But at the same time I have been undercutting myself. For even as I sought to do good, I sought something else.”

“Elihu,” whispered Cara.

“Of course. He is the other half of my heart, and I will not be complete until I find him again.”

Cara, thinking of her grandmother’s Earth friends Kevin and Phil, could not help asking, “Was he your . . . were you two . . .”

Fallon laughed, a kind and comforting sound. “Were we lovers? No. To be *alahim* is something different. Not better or worse, simply . . . different.”

Though Cara was fairly certain she knew the answer to her next question, she wanted to hear Fallon actually speak it out loud. So she asked, “If you were exiled to Earth, how is it that you are here in Luster?”

The big man smiled and moved his arm in a sweeping gesture, indicating everything around them. “I am here because *this* is the world Elihu created all those years ago. I had heard whispers of Luster during my millennia on Earth, for I sometimes traveled in strange circles, and I suspected it must be Elihu’s world. But I wasn’t certain until I actually arrived. Then I knew,

instantly, that this was the place he had created, for I can sense him in every part of it, feel his presence in every leaf and every pebble.” He paused, and his face grew troubled. “Yet I cannot sense Elihu himself, save but dimly. Where can he be? His world has grown enormously since he first showed it to me, grown beautifully, just as he dreamed. But now it is in mortal danger.”

“Why is that?” asked Cara. “I mean, I assume it has to do with Beloved opening her gate, but how could a new gate have caused what is happening now? There were seven gates already, and they didn’t have such an effect.”

“I suspect those gates were opened with a great deal more care than this one. The kind of magic involved is disruptive by nature, but can be controlled. However, Beloved did not merely do this carelessly. Whether through malice or ignorance I do not know, but the fact is she chose to blast her opening through the exact center of this world.”

“Gaaah!” cried Medafil. “She came *through* the Axis Mundi?”

Fallon nodded. “I’m afraid so, friend gryphon. And in doing so, she pierced the living heart of Luster. The results, as we have all been feeling, were catastrophic. I know how these things work, and I am certain that the roots of that tree extend to the very edges of this still-growing world, however large it has become. Now that the tree is in mortal danger, so is the world that is defined and held together by its roots.” He paused, then said cautiously, “It is almost too much to imagine Beloved chose that place at random. But if she simply wanted to destroy Luster, why come through with all her men? Merely opening that tunnel would have been sufficient. It’s possible she doesn’t even realize what she has done. If so, I fear there is some other force at work here, some power of malicious intent.”

Cara shivered at these words and thought of the Whisperer, even as another tremor rippled the ground beneath their feet.

“Feel that?” asked Fallon. “It was the roots of the tree, writhing in pain. That pain, that writhing, is the source of the tremors and quakes. They are the spasms of a dying world and, if the tree is not healed soon, Luster will tear itself apart.”

“*Can* it be healed?” asked Cara, sick with horror.

Fallon shook his head. “In truth, I do not know. Even if it is possible, it’s likely Elihu is the only one who could do it. But where is he? Why would he leave his world at the time of its greatest crisis?”

For this Cara had no answer, of course, and so they traveled for a while in silence. Finally Fallon said, “Do you mind telling me where you are heading?”

Cara paused. Deciding to trust him, she said, “I’m going to the Axis Mundi.”

Fallon smiled. “I have just come from there. However, I begin to believe it is the proper place for me to be right now, after all. Do you mind if I journey back with you? It’s not very far. We may even be able to connect with my former traveling companions.”

“Was Lightfoot one of them?” she asked, nearly unable to contain her joy.

“Yes.”

“Who else were you traveling with?”

“A man named Ian Hunter —”

Now she could not contain herself, and a most un-unicorn-like cry broke from her throat.

Fallon looked at her in concern. “Are you all right, Silverhoof? Oh, that was foolish of me! I’m sorry, I should have realized the name of Hunter would have a fearful quality for you. But this man is not an enemy of the unicorns. He came through with me, not as part of Beloved’s army.”

Cara’s mind was racing, wild with happiness that her father was back in Luster, desperate to see him again, but also terrified of how — or if — she could tell him what she had done. And looming beyond all that was the greater question of whether he had been successful in his latest hunt, the quest to find her mother.

“Silverhoof?” asked Fallon.

She shook her head again. “I’m fine, just a little startled. I have met the man you were traveling with. I wasn’t expecting to see him again so soon.”

“Do you know anything of his story?” asked Fallon. *Cara wondered if he was testing her in some way.*

“I do,” she said. Then, tentatively, filled with hope and fear at what the answer might be, she added, “He was on a mission when last I saw him. Do you know anything of that?”

“When I met him he was seeking his wife, Martha, who was being held captive in the Rainbow Prison. Is that what you mean?”

Cara nodded, unable to speak.

“Yes, he was successful. His wife is here with him, and he is now seeking his daughter. He is very intent upon his quest.”

It was all Cara could do to keep from crying out again.

Her trembling grew greater.

“Peace, Silverhoof,” whispered Fallon, placing a hand on her shoulder. “It will be —”

With a cry he pulled back, almost as if he had been burned. At the same time Cara's knees buckled as an unexpected feeling of connection surged through her.

Man and unicorn stared at each other, astonishment writ large on both their faces.

Fallon was the first to speak. "What is this about?" His voice was firm, just this side of anger.

"What do you mean?" she asked, trying to not let the quaver in her own voice betray her.

"I can sense something of Elihu in you, some essential part of him. How can that be?"

"I might be able to answer that if I understood what you really are," she responded. "Why did I feel such a start of recognition when you touched me? What is your connection with unicorns?"

Fallon smiled. "I'd rather start with you. What in heaven's name are you?"

"Why would you say I am anything other than what you see?" countered Cara, trying to hide her alarm.

Fallon looked away. He was silent for a time, but finally said, "I know a great deal about unicorns."

"That's no answer."

He turned back. His expression was not angry, exactly, but she could see that he had made a decision about which he was not entirely happy.

"Why do you know a great deal about unicorns?" she pressed.

Fallon took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then said, "Because I am the one who created them."

The Legend Continues

What happened when the unicorns of Luster faced Beloved's army of Hunters as the Last Hunt hurtled toward its conclusion, the choices and sacrifices that had to be made in the desperate attempt to save Luster . . . these things and more are told in *The Gathered Glory,* the seventh book of the Unicorn Chronicles, where the final secrets are revealed and the last mysteries unraveled.

About the Author

Bruce Coville grew up in a rural area around the corner from his grandparent's dairy farm. He considers himself especially lucky to have had a swamp and a forest behind his home.

His writing for children affected by his own early reading, which included lots of pulp fiction and comi c books, but also had a healthy dose of myths and legends–a taste he first developed when his fourth-grade teacher read aloud the story of Odysseus.

He has been reading fantasy ever since and has long dreamed of creating an epic series like The Unicorn Chronicles.

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